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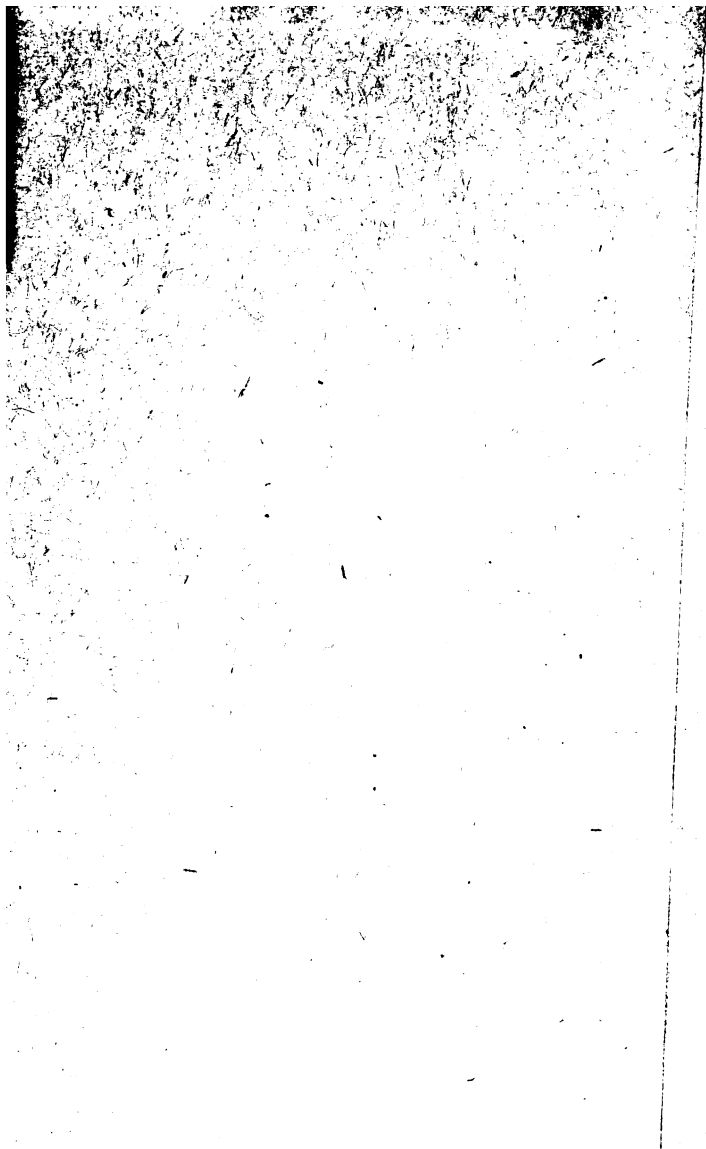
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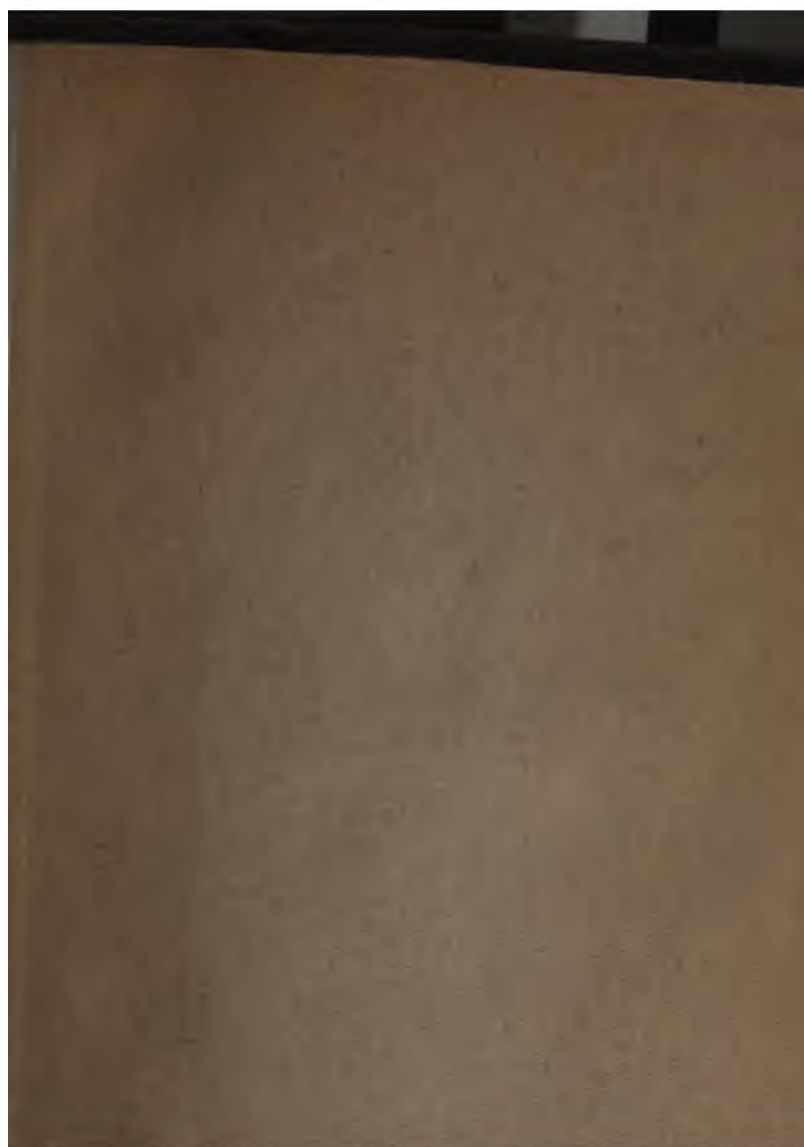
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## **HILDA AGAINST THE WORLD**



***BY THE SAME AUTHOR***

**ANNA LOMBARD**

**(500,000 copies)**

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**THE ETERNAL FIRES**

**SELF AND THE OTHER**

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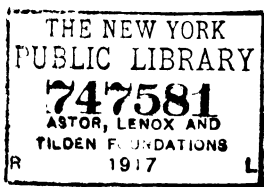
# HILDA AGAINST THE WORLD

BY  
VICTORIA CROSS *Victoria Cross*  
AUTHOR OF "THE NIGHT OF TEMPTATION," "THE LIFE  
SENTENCE," "TO-MORROW," ETC.

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**HILDA AGAINST THE WORLD**

*Mrs Eliot Norton - 27 Nov. 1916.*





# HILDA AGAINST THE WORLD

## PART I

### CHAPTER I

MORRISON station looked the picture of desolation when, towards the close of a February afternoon, Roland West stepped out on its dripping and wind-swept platform.

A lowering sky, full of rolling inky clouds, hung close over the waste of sodden, ploughed fields that surrounded the station. The row of tall poplar trees that divided the asphalt platform from the muddy country road, and on which the leaves rustled so sweetly against the blue of summer skies, now stood gaunt and bare, their boughs rattling in the wind like chattering teeth. In the long strips of flower-beds beneath, the chrysanthemums lay beaten and prostrate on the rain-soaked earth.

The station-master lifted his flag, and the train moved on its way. Faces looked out of the windows with a relieved expression, a sort of "Thank Heaven, this is not our destination" look upon them. The station-master disappeared, leaving Roland and the

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solitary porter the only two figures on the platform.

"There's a trap for you, sir, from the asylum," the latter said, approaching and touching his cap. He spoke deferentially, for Roland, without the least affectation, with the greatest simplicity of dress and manner, had that natural distinction of look and bearing that made others unconsciously inclined to respect him.

"Thanks, I shall be glad of a lift up there this evening," he answered, giving up his ticket, and the two men turned to cross the line and made their way out of the station, now silent and lonely as the grave in the gathering dusk.

To Roland truly a grave it was, where his youth and all his hopes and twenty good years of his life lay buried. For little Morton station owed its being only to Longhurst Asylum, where Doctor Harrington received a hundred and fifty mad, imbecile, weak-minded, or mentally deranged human beings for experimentation, or, as the prospectus put it, treatment, and here twenty years ago had Mrs. West, Roland's bride of a year, been received, and in spite of all experiments, perhaps because of some of them, had remained obstinately mad ever since.

Each time that Roland came down there, Morton seemed to grow more horrible to him. In summer the glory of the free air and smiling skies seemed to mock the state of its condemned prisoners, and in winter the coldness of death itself seemed to wrap

round him when, as now, he gazed over the bare brown fields, the low ragged hedges lying soaked beneath the darkening sky.

He sat in the dog-cart beside the taciturn driver — for all the employés of the asylum acquired a strange habit of absolute silence — going over in his mind, as he had done so often, the torn, broken, ruined record of his life, and the sense of cruel injustice, of bitter punishment undeserved, ate into his being this evening as it had never done yet.

If he had only never married! That one thought, so familiar to him now that it seemed as if there must be a smooth worn track in his brain where it continually traversed it, burned him to-night with fresh agonising fire. Why had he done it? Oh, to recall those hours at two-and-twenty when he had loved the vision of beauty his wife was then, and had married her, hotly, hastily, believing all that was told him, never learning till afterwards that she came of a mad family, even then had the seeds of madness in her!

What had been his faults? Only a too great credulity, too great trust, too great generosity. For these he had been punished with twenty years of blank, barren servitude. He could not love without knowing his love must bring suffering to its object, since he could never marry because this poor creature, who had lost nearly all semblance to a human being, bore his name in the darkness of her prison. Was



it fair? Was it just? Why had Fate done this thing?

A sharp jerk, as the trap stopped, brought him back into the present. They were at the high brick wall, before the iron gates of Longhurst Asylum. Far back in the grounds loomed up the great stone pile of the house itself, black against the grey sky, with a few lights here and there behind its windows.

A bell rang harshly and the gates creaked slowly open. Then the slush of wheels on wet gravel, the heavy clang of the gate, the scrape of a bolt shot home, and they drove on up to the house. The hall door opened as Roland got down from the trap, and the doctor himself appeared in the light on the top step.

"Glad to see you. I was pleased you let us know you were coming so that I could send the trap for you."

"Yes, thanks very much; I was glad of it. What a night! How are you, doctor?"

By this time Roland was in the hall, his overcoat was taken from him, and he held out his hand in greeting. The doctor shook hands and then pushed open a door leading to his own study and followed Roland in. He was a tall, heavily built man, with a large nose, small eyes close together, and a hard, thin-lipped mouth.

"Sit down," he said, pushing a chair forward, and Roland sat down, looking round the room, and

thinking of the contrast its extreme comfort, its blazing fire and cheery light and luxurious furniture presented to some other of the rooms of the establishment. Velvet sofas and deep soft chairs stood on the thick pile of the crimson carpet where no footfall would sound. Handsome curtains shut out the dreary night. By the doctor's roomy chair, close drawn to the hearth, stood a small table covered with inviting tea-things. Cake, cream, and buttered toast caught Roland's eye as the ruddy light played over them, and reminded him how bad the doctor thought they were — for his patients.

"How is Lilian? There is no change, I suppose?" Roland asked, as the doctor settled himself at the table and began pouring out the tea.

"My dear friend, there will never be any change until the last great change of all. When that occurs I shall let you know immediately, but you must not hope for your freedom yet."

Roland put his hand over his eyes. "You always put things so horribly," he returned; "as if I longed for her death. I have never, I think, done that, though, as you say, it would mean freedom. I never can bear to think of it; it seems so terrible. A woman one once loved!"

The doctor merely shrugged his shoulders, and having made the tea to his satisfaction, handed a cup to his guest.

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"You have found consolation long before this, I suppose?"

"Not in another woman's love, if you mean that, no."

"Well, it gives you some interest in life to keep on looking for it."

Roland did not answer for some minutes. When he spoke again it was to say merely:

"Can I see Lilian? That is what I came for. I should like to see her again myself."

"Certainly, I will send for her as soon as we have finished tea."

The doctor here plunged heartily into the plate of hot muffins, and Roland sat watching him eat, buried in a melancholy silence. The doctor chatted about some improvements he was making in the west wing of the building, and a new serum that he was pumping in wholesale into some of his luckless patients, the non-paying ones naturally, for those who paid well were too valuable to have their lives risked in that way; and Roland listened with a sick disgust to his tales of reckless experiments on the weak and helpless people in his charge. When he had amply done justice to his substantial tea, the doctor rose and rang the bell.

"Tell Nurse Brown to bring down Mrs. West, please," he said to the maid who appeared, and Roland sat back in his arm-chair in an attitude of extreme despondency, waiting to see *his wife!* The

doctor crossed to the other side of the room and commenced to arrange some papers on his desk. After a pause the door behind him was opened quietly, and a trim-looking, hard-faced nurse in uniform entered the room, holding the arm of her patient, a plain-looking woman with a heavy apathetic countenance. She stared about her vacantly with dull wandering eyes. Roland rose and went forward to her with outstretched hand.

"Lilian, have you quite forgotten me?" His manner and tone were most gentle and affectionate. If anything could have pierced the frightful veil that was drawn over the woman's brain, surely those moving tones in Roland's voice would have done so. He tried to take her hand, but she drew it back instantly and shrunk away from him with stupidly staring eyes. The nurse had released her and joined the doctor at the distant table. Roland, with the keenest anguish on his face, approached her a little nearer.

"Lilian," he said appealingly, "you remember your husband, Roland West, don't you? I have come to see you. I want to know if you are happy here?"

The woman continued to edge away from him, staring with a look of stupid horror at him. Then suddenly she burst into screams, senseless, empty, meaningless screams, terrible to listen to.

"Go away; I don't like you. You are a horrid

man. Nurse! Nurse! take me away; I don't like this man."

Roland fell back, dismayed by the fury that seemed gathering in the red, distorted face. He feared it would produce some fresh access of her malady. The nurse hurriedly came forward, and with a stern look cowed the unfortunate creature into silence, but she continued to stare at Roland with starting eyes, and her hands worked nervously together as if trying to strangle some one.

"You can take her away, nurse," Roland said sadly. "I only distress her. Perhaps I shall make her worse."

The nurse immediately gripped her patient's arm, and swinging her round, conducted her through the door and out of the room with very little ceremony.

Roland sank into the arm-chair again, and buried his face in his hands.

"Last time she recognised me," he said bitterly. "Now she does not even do that."

"One day a little better, the next a little worse, but no real difference either way," returned the doctor. "For years she'll go on like that. Harmless, you know, as a general rule; might be let out but for her homicidal fits. Must keep her under restraint on that account."

Roland gave a sort of groaning assent. The doctor came up and patted him on the shoulder.

"You mustn't take it to heart so much. It's no fault of yours. You have done everything you could for her. She's had every advantage, and here she's as well off as she can be. You must accept your life, just live it as well as you can, crippled as it is. There are heaps of people worse off than you are. There's a young fellow here now, been here about a year, one of the saddest cases I know, young, good-looking, gentlemanly. You'd never know in ordinary life there was anything the matter with him . . ." He broke off abruptly, afraid that Roland was not listening. At the sudden pause his guest looked up listlessly.

"Well, what *is* the matter with him?"

"Funniest case I have had yet," returned the other, warming to his subject. "Well, the thing is, his emotional and moral sense seems absolutely dead. In other words, he has no appreciation of the importance or the result or the character of any action, and at the same time is open to any suggestion. So, though he has little or no initiatory powers, he might become instrumentally dangerous. I hope I am making myself clear."

"Not very," answered Roland, who in his state of overwhelming depression found it difficult to keep his attention on the doctor's words.

"Well, perhaps you'd understand an example better," said the doctor testily. "I mean if some one suggested to him to commit a murder, he might walk

off then and there and do it, simply because he does not fully realise what murder is, does not understand the result or importance of any action, and also the trait of obedience is abnormally developed. If I order him to do anything he does it at once. He has no will with which to oppose another will, and if left to himself he does nothing, because he has no will to initiate anything. If he were told to marry a woman he'd marry her, but he would not understand what he had done. He would never kiss his bride unless she asked him to."

"And what do you call that form of insanity, medically?"

"Well, it's usually called 'Amentia. It's often pleaded in the case of criminals, and there is no doubt some of those poor wretches have it, and don't realise in the least what they are doing. But then you can't allow it or every criminal would plead it and get off."

Roland nodded. "What's your patient's name?" he asked.

"Clive Talbot. I'll call him in, then you'll see. He's perfectly ordinary until you suggest something to him. Then he'll do it no matter what it is."

The doctor got up as he spoke and rang, and when the maid appeared said: "Send Mr. Talbot to me."

Roland looked at his watch.

"I must be going."

"I won't keep you a minute. I'd like you just to see Clive."

The door opened as Roland rose from his chair, and Clive Talbot entered, and Roland, with no faint prescience of the immense part this man was going to play in his life, let his eyes wander over him with a certain attention and interest, because of his striking appearance.

Clive was tall, with a well-balanced figure, and held himself with a distinguished air that is always specially noticeable amongst Englishmen, for so few possess it. He came into the room with a pleasant smile, and went up to Roland, as the doctor introduced them, and shook hands with easy self-possession. His face was singularly handsome and peculiarly bright and intelligent-looking, with fine regular features and large dark eyes under sweeping expressive eyebrows. In fact, the face was so perfect in its statuesque lines that it would have been hard and cold but for the bright smile and the lustrous warmth of the eyes. The skin was pale and clear, and there was a look of youth and immaturity about him that prevented his beauty being so effective as it would be a year or two later.

"I am glad to meet you. How do you like it down here? Longhurst always seems quiet and nice to me after the racket of London," Roland said pleasantly, and the young fellow answered enthusiastically:



"Yes, Longhurst's a jolly place. Lots to do here too. Seen our tennis courts? They are fine. Then the woods round are beautiful for long walks."

"Do you do any reading?" asked Roland, for the beautiful, intellectual forehead of the other struck him and suggested the question.

"Not as much as I should like. There is no time. Doctor is always hunting me out to take exercise. Fresh air and exercise is his idea. There is very good sculling on the river, and I do a lot of that. You came to see some one down here, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Roland sadly. "My wife."

He was surprised at the wonderful flash of sympathy that shone in Clive's eyes and irradiated the whole responsive face.

"How awfully sad for you! I am sorry. Will she get better, do you think?"

"I am afraid not," returned Roland gloomily.

The doctor came up at this moment and laid his hand firmly on Clive's arm.

"Clive, just take your boots off and throw them out of the window, will you?" he said, going over to the window and putting it open.

Roland watched the young man curiously as this order was given.

Clive, without any hesitation, sat down on the sofa and began to unlace his boots. As soon as he had unlaced and drawn them off, he picked them up

in one hand and threw them, with an easy gesture that spoke of strength and practice, through the window.

"It will be no joke to find them again in the dark," he said, with a light natural laugh, to Roland, so natural that it made the elder man study him with interest.

"Thank you," said the doctor. "Now go into the garden and pick them up and then go upstairs."

Clive rose from the sofa and stretched out his hand to Roland. All his movements, his whole bearing, had a dignified grace about them which was very charming.

"Good-bye, Colonel. I hope your wife will get better."

Roland smiled a melancholy smile, and took the young fellow's hand in a warm grasp. "Thank you. Good-bye."

When he had left the room the doctor turned to Roland and said: "You see? quite natural, quite sane, until some absurdity is suggested. Then he does it; he does not realise its folly. That critical sense, which we may say governs all the actions of the normal human being, is gone."

"Permanently?"

"I should say so."

"It seems a sad case, and, as you say, interesting . . . but I must really go now. Write to me

if there's any possible thing I can do for Lilian, anything to make her life brighter. If she has any fancy, let me know. Good-bye."

Roland held out his hand, and the doctor took it and then walked with him to the door.

"The trap will run you over to the station and you won't have to wait. You'll just get the six o'clock express back."

Roland thanked him and went out. The cold foggy air seemed to enfold him like a shroud. As he climbed into the dog-cart he caught a glimpse of Clive by the light shed from the door, with a boot on one foot and only the stocking on the other, still searching amongst the flower-beds for the missing boot.

Infinitely depressed as he always was by these visits, Roland pulled his overcoat collar up, and let the man drive him back in silence, as they had come.

When he got back to town that evening and to his own place the solitude and silence of his rooms seemed intolerable to him. Silence and solitude out of which glared upon him from every corner the memory of his destroyed and wasted life, of long past years never to be refound or replaced, looking-glasses which reflected his own face, showing it still handsome, his own head untouched by grey, glasses that seemed to speak like friends, telling him that there was still time to enjoy, the coming years were not hopeless yet; deluding glasses that

brought only his sense of bondage more sharply home to him; couches on which his vision sometimes seemed to paint the gracious and lovely forms of women, forms that had never rested there and that never might. . . . No, the rooms were intolerable, he could not stay in them. His letters lay on the table, those that had come in since he left town. Perhaps one might contain an invitation for this evening. He turned them over till he came to an envelope addressed in a feminine hand.

"Mrs. Thorne," he murmured to himself; took it up and opened it. His eyes skimmed over the contents and then rested on this passage:

"Come informally to see me any time. My youngest daughter is with me now; I want you to meet her. . . ." He read no further. He laid the note down and went to dress. When he had finished it was still early enough to catch them perhaps before dinner. He went down and out, and took a taxi to the small, quiet, and fashionable street where Mrs. Thorne had her unpretentious and expensive little house.

"Mrs. Thorne had not yet come back from an At Home," the man told him at the door; "but Miss Hilda was in the drawing-room."

Roland decided he would go up, and was shown into a tiny and dainty drawing-room, furnished in rose satin, and brilliant with rose-shaded electric light.

"Colonel West," announced the man softly, and shut the door imperceptibly.

On the rug before the brightly blazing fire, in a low chair, sat a girl reading. Her long light hair was down, simply caught together on the crown of her head with a blue fillet, and from her attitude, with her back turned to the fire, Roland gained the impression she had been washing and was now drying it. He thought he had never seen such hair. It fell to her waist and lay like a cape on her shoulders; one great tress had fallen forward as she bent over her book. In the glow of the fire it shone and sparkled like living gold, and waved and curled like the tendrils of some delicate vine.

The girl looked up as the door opened, and rose as she saw a visitor. She came forward with an extraordinarily light and easy step, so quick and yet so graceful, it conveyed the idea of intense vitality, with the most fairy-like lightness. Her dress, of a pale blue silk, glimmered and shone as she moved; her eyes as she lifted them to Roland's were the intense blue of the sea.

"I am very sorry mamma is out, but I think she can't be long now. Do sit down, won't you?" Her voice was beautiful, the tones and the melody of it made Roland think of the wind on the *Æolian* harps he had heard in Greece, just as her eyes recalled the blue of the *Ægean* Sea. She sat down and closed her book. Roland also sat down on the chair she

rolled forward, and they both looked at each other in silence.

Roland felt he could look at her for ever. The blue fillet holding back her hair passed across her forehead, which was soft like the whitest velvet; her eyebrows, a dark tawny brown, were level, and with the eyes gave a look of immense power to the face; the nose was short and small and white; the lips very red and full; the cheeks a delicate rose.

From her face his eyes fell to her throat, a round white ivory column, bare to its base, and then passed on to the form beneath the shimmering blue of her dress, a form of which every line seemed long and sloping and supple and sinuous, melting into other curves and lines, slowly, harmoniously, with the least movement.

There was nothing harsh or abrupt about her in look or voice or motion; line melted into line; curve vanished into curve softly, harmoniously, as the floating air of some wonderful melody.

She gazed at Roland with interest, and into the eyes of both came that look of sympathy and understanding that is born of mutual admiration.

Roland was one of the handsomest men in London, and quite the handsomest she had ever seen, and she let her eyes rest on his dark hair and dark arched eyebrows, on the strong clear-cut nose and chin, with reflective interest.

"I am afraid I am disturbing you," he said, look-

ing at the book in her hand. "You were reading? What book is it?"

"This is Theocritus," she said, turning the little slim brown volume to him that he might see the title. "I was told he would be very difficult, but I don't find him difficult at all."

She spoke with such an air of disappointment that Roland laughed.

"Do you specially like your reading to be difficult?" he asked. "Most people would think that any Greek would satisfy them on that head."

Hilda laughed too, and the blue eyes seemed to dance and gleam as the Ægean Sea sparkles in the sunbeams.

"Well, you must admit difficult things are interesting," she answered; "and simple, easy things are not. Look at simple, easy lives, who wants to read them? We always choose Napoleon and Alexander and that sort of people to write biographies about."

"As you don't find Theocritus difficult, and therefore not interesting, perhaps you don't mind my interrupting you?" Roland said, smiling.

"No, not a bit; I am delighted you have come. But I do think Theocritus is lovely. I have been quite lost amongst the thyme and listening to the bees humming on the slopes of Hymettus. He is quite wonderful in the way he creates the atmosphere he wishes all round you as you read."

"You have only just come home from college, have you? Your mother and I have been friends for years, and she has often spoken of you, but I have been so much abroad with my regiment, I have always been away when you were at home."

"You know my sister Rose, I suppose?"

"Yes, Rose is a very stately and worldly young person; not given to the study of Greek poets, I imagine?"

"Yes," Hilda answered, and she looked away to the fire with a sudden very sad expression. "Rose is very fond of society and all that; she is utterly different from me. It all seems so dull to me and such a waste of time."

There was a noise of people approaching outside the door, and the next moment it opened, and Mrs. Thorne and her elder daughter, Rose, appeared.

Mrs. Thorne seemed pleased to see Roland, and came forward quickly with outstretched hand.

"I am glad you've found your way here," she said, smiling; "and so sorry we were out, but I've no doubt Hilda has been amusing you with her strange ideas. Now you'll stop to dinner, won't you? We are alone, and we shall be so glad if you will."

She was a pretty and perfectly dressed woman; both she and Rose looked as if they might have stepped from the pages of a fashion book. Their dress was absolutely correct to the smallest detail;



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their hair was done in the newest style even to its tiniest curl. Their attitude and every motion suggested that they were living the life of the world and that was the only one they knew, the only one they ever had lived or ever could live.

Roland accepted promptly. This place, with Hilda sitting there gazing at him with her sea-blue eyes, seemed like a haven of rest and joy, after Longhurst and his empty silent rooms.

When the women left him to change for dinner he walked about the little drawing-room with a sense of lightness at his heart, very different from the dead weight that had fallen on it within the asylum walls. He took up the slim volume Hilda had been reading and opened it by chance at the page where the shepherdess refuses the proffered love of the shepherd because she fears if she yields to it she will lose the perfect rose blush on her cheek. He read those lines, then closed the book frowning. It seemed a bad omen. He was more unfortunate than the Doric shepherd, and any woman whom he loved would have to sacrifice more than the delicate bloom of her face on the altar of his love.

At dinner he sat opposite Hilda. Her hair was now, to his regret, done up, but he thought this was compensated for by the view allowed him of her milky neck and arms in her white dinner dress. Through the dinner, all the time he was chatting lightly with the others, he studied her face, so full

of contradictory traits not usually found together in the same countenance. The mouth seemed so sensuous, and the forehead so intellectual, the chin and dimpled cheeks so yielding, the eyes and eyebrows so compelling; and while her sister's face suggested that its owner felt and acted always by a certain standard that could never be altered, from Hilda's one gained the impression she might become a Jeanne d'Arc, or a great actress, or a Central African explorer, anything—one could not tell where the brilliant fire that shone in the eyes might lead her. Her dress was as perfect, her hair as correctly done as her sister's, but there was something about her that told you at once she was not of the fashion-plate order, that she would never plan out her life by the foot rule of convention, that she would remain always independent in thought and action, natural, free.

After dinner, when they were in the drawing-room, Mrs. Thorne asked Hilda to play for them. Hilda looked at Roland with a long reflective gaze, and when she had seated herself at the piano, began to play, of all things in the world, Lohengrin's "Reproach to Elsa." It pierced to Roland's heart as he sat back in his chair close to the instrument, with his eyes shut. This surely seemed another omen of warning to him. Lohengrin's "Reproach to Elsa!" his appeal to her not to seek to know his circumstances, he is surrounded with mystery, he begs her not to try

to penetrate it. The scene of the bridal chamber rose before his closed lids, the figure of Lohengrin imploring Elsa to inquire no more. How she played! how she pressed the wonderful melody out of the keys! He had often heard it, but never with the force and passion she put into it; the quick pulsing of the accompaniment in the treble and the deep low tones in the bass were so rendered as to make Lohengrin's distress and agony vibrate through and through the listener.

When she ceased she let her hands fall in her lap and sat still. Roland leant towards her.

"You played splendidly, more like a man than a girl; you must have studied a great deal."

"Only fifteen hours a day for two years," she returned, with a little smile. "I wanted to be a professional, but I found I was too nervous. I can't play at all except just to people with whom I am in sympathy or to please myself, so I had to give up that idea."

"Fifteen hours a day! But that is enormous! How have you found time for all this work?"

"I began to study really hard at fifteen. I am now twenty-two. One can do a great deal in seven years, if one never wastes a minute."

She ceded her place at the piano to Rose, who came up, and who played a piece Roland had never heard and would certainly never recognise again, so little did he listen to it. He and Hilda were sitting

close side by side, and he was entirely absorbed in his thoughts of her; of the passion she had shown in her playing, of the curious virility of her character, of the living force in her.

When Rose left the piano Mrs. Thorne was looking tired, and Roland got up to say good-bye. As Hilda put her soft white hand that had recently shown so much power into his and he clasped it, he looked into the blue depths of her eyes, and the look and the hand clasp together made her heart beat and the colour glow in her cheek; she looked up too at him earnestly, enquiringly, as if seeking to read something in his dark smiling eyes that was too difficult for her, as Elsa may have looked at Lohengrin.

When Roland returned to his own place everything was changed for him; the gold light of joy seemed again flooding his life, which for twenty years had been swallowed up in grey shadows. His feet hardly seemed to touch the ground; his heart swelled with a sense of joy like the heart of a young bird when it takes its first flight from the nest to the sunlight of the open fields.

He sat down in his silent room thinking the same thoughts over again a hundred times, recalling her image and each one of her movements; hearing again the tones of her voice, and revelling in the sensation of interest and happiness so unfamiliar to him. He knew it was all folly and madness, a chimera, such as all joy must be for him, that danced before his

brain, but he gave himself over to it, courted the sweet illusion though he knew it vain and false. To-morrow he would certainly dismiss all thought of her; he would never see her again; he knew he must not; he knew he was doomed to perpetual loneliness and solitude. But this knowledge was powerless to check the bounding joy in his veins, that real elixir of life that love has the power to pour through the human being. For the sense of attraction to another in itself confers an infinite irresistible joy, however malevolent the circumstances, however mad the passion, however fatal its obvious results. Nothing can conquer the invincible delight of it. Joy is the very soul of love, and to this joy Roland abandoned himself, wild and foolish and extravagant as it seemed to him, sternly as his reason sat and frowned within him.

Barren and waste the years lay behind him, and so must they be before him; but this one night of warm and pleasant fantasy he would snatch out of them, and fancy himself free as other men were. A young girl had smiled at him with her blue eyes full of admiration, admiration which could easily be turned into love, and Roland felt the wings of his youth, which he fancied dead and buried, waving about him again, and his heart beating lightly as it does at eighteen. When a man has married about twenty and has had over twenty years of sorrow after, he thinks himself old at forty-three, he seems

old to himself as Roland did, but he forgot that Nature will not be hurried any more than she will be delayed, and her time for taking all her loans back from Roland had not yet come. He had still the deep colour of his hair and eyes, and all the strength and grace she had lent him in youth, and though to himself he might seem a hundred, to her he was only his due forty-three, and not to be disfigured nor destroyed at present.

To-night, however, even to himself, his hundred years seemed to have flown away somewhere, two eyes of intense blue under straight brown eyebrows had dispelled them. He was a youth again, wandering alone in a golden world with Hilda Thorne.

## CHAPTER II

THE next morning Roland rose in a frame of mind of unparalleled goodness. The atmosphere of virtue that stretched about him was so dense that it made him feel very dull and depressed, but his resolves were genuine enough and very creditable. He would not see Hilda again except on those formal occasions, if any should arise, which Society necessitates. He would keep away from the Thornes' house. He would drive all thought of her from him, as he had done that of other women, of other faces, fair, smiling faces that had looked kindly upon him.

He finished his dressing, completed his lonely breakfast, had written two or three letters and was thinking of going out, when the servant brought in a note. Roland took it from the salver, opened it and read, a sudden colour rushing over his face as he did so:

"I am downstairs in my motor. Will you come for a drive with me round the Park and back to luncheon? Mamma and Rose are out as usual, and I am all alone.—  
H. THORNE."

To see her again this morning! To sit close to her as they drove! To lunch with her alone! How absurdly delightful the whole thing seemed to him.

His heart leapt as if he were eighteen again. What should he say? He must go down and see her. But he could tell her he was engaged and had no time to spare. He could not well send a note down of refusal when she would know he was there. No, he must go down.

"You can go," he said to the waiting man, "I will come down," and he ran down the stairs saying to himself that he certainly must excuse himself and not drive with her.

The street door stood open and he saw her sitting in the motor outside. She was all in black velvet, with a small black velvet hat on her thick, light hair. A ray of the wintry sun struck across her face, turned with a lovely enquiring gaze towards the door.

It was useless! The moment he saw her Roland felt he must go whither she wished. As it is dangerous to offer a starving man bread if he is not to seize upon it, so must one not offer a few hours' happiness to a man whose life is absolutely bare of it and expect him to decline them. It is beyond the strength of the average human being.

Roland went forward and stood by the open motor. Hilda smiled up at him, and his hand was clasped in her exquisitely gloved, delicate feminine hand, and all the fibres and nerves of the man's body down to the soles of his feet vibrated with pleasure as his fingers closed upon it.



"Are you engaged? You're not? How lovely! Then you will come with me, will you?" she said, and her blue eyes, bright and dancing as the sparkling sea itself, looked up at him as if seeking to read his face like the page of a book. Roland never knew exactly what he answered. The next moment he was bounding up the stairs to get his hat and light overcoat.

It was wrong, he knew. These first simple steps forward on the edge of the black morass of a passion that he had no right to feel would soon lead him to a point from which there was no turning back, where he must sink and be engulfed. But he was reckless. He would not listen to his conscience that had admonished him and kept him straight for twenty years; he was tired of conscience, tired of virtue, tired of the dullness of it all. With a sense of elation, of joy, quite disproportionate to the apparently simple entertainment before him, he collected his things and went down. The door was opened for him; he took his seat beside her—the motor was delightful, it was so small—and they drove off to the Park.

They whirled round and round it several times, for Hilda liked travelling at the fastest speed allowable, and they found so much to say to each other that the swift silent motor made circle after circle without their noticing the time or distance. At last Hilda said, "Now we'll go back to lunch," and bent

forward to give the order, when Roland laid his hand on her arm.

"No, come to lunch with me at the Savoy, will you?"

Hilda paused and looked at him.

"Why? Why don't you want to come back with me?"

"Because I should so like to feel I was entertaining *you*, doing something to please or amuse you. It will be a change for you to lunch there with me, instead of at home. Do give me that pleasure."

Hilda laughed. "Very well, I will. It will be great fun. I have never been there."

She sat back in the motor and let Roland tell the man to drive them to the Savoy. When they arrived it was a little late for luncheon, but still the balcony overlooking the Embankment was fairly full. Roland was steering towards a table against the window when they almost collided with a couple who were just rising from their seats to leave.

In the bright wintry sunlight pouring through the panes they found themselves face to face with her sister and a tall disagreeable-faced man, whom Roland did not know.

"Why, Rose!" and Hilda laughed gaily. "How do you do, Bertie? Colonel West, Mr. Heywood."

"Hilda!" exclaimed Rose in a tone of severe surprise; "you are here with Colonel West?"

"As you see. And you are here with Mr. Hey-

wood?" Hilda could not help a little tone of mimicry and mockery coming into her voice.

"I am *engaged* to Bertie."

"And so am I to Colonel West — for luncheon. Is not that enough?" laughed Hilda, passing on. Her sister and her companion only made the coldest inclination of the head to Roland, and then went out. Hilda shrugged her shoulders a little as she took the chair indicated to her by the window and began to draw off her gloves.

"Poor Rose, she is quite alarmed apparently."

"I am sorry," said Roland. "It's all my fault; I ought not to have asked you."

"Why? What harm are we doing? It's surely not necessary to be engaged to marry a person before one lunches with him?"

"No, unfortunately, I am afraid it is not," returned Roland, "otherwise how happy I should be at this minute."

Hilda laughed again. She took it all as a joke, and had no idea of the bitter pain that underlay Roland's lightly spoken words.

"I do think Heywood is the greatest prig I ever knew," she continued. "How Rose can tolerate him I cannot imagine."

"Who is he?" Roland asked, after he had ordered the luncheon.

"The Honourable Herbert Heywood is first of all a prig; then he is a rich man who has a very big

place in the country, Clearbrook; then he is dissipated; he drinks; he is altogether detestable; and lastly, and worst of all, he is going to be my brother-in-law."

Roland looked grave and sympathetic. Hilda spoke lightly, but he heard the accent of grief and distress on it all.

"It is funny," she continued. "She is always terribly afraid that *I* shall do something which will injure *her*, something unconventional, but she never seems to see how she is injuring *me* by bringing that horrible man into the family and making him my brother-in-law. She has what I call 'Red Book blindness,' that the greater part of Society seems to be afflicted with. If a person's name is to be found in the Red Book, people are absolutely blind to all their faults."

Roland laughed. "The Red Book makes them good, and a large income added makes them perfect! Is that it?" he asked jestingly.

"That's it," she assented. "But not to me. Neither Red Books nor incomes make the slightest difference to their virtue in my eyes."

"You are unorthodox, then; that's what makes your sister afraid of what you may do."

"I suppose so. If one is the least original one may or may not have a good time oneself, but one certainly gives more trouble to one's friends. It is most convenient for everybody if they all agree to

trot along the worn little path of strict conventionality like a flock of herded sheep."

They had got beyond their *hors d'œuvres* by this time, and Roland watched her delightedly as she consumed a chicken curry. She ate so daintily and so prettily, with zest, like a person in perfect health and full of life, an impression which was heightened by the very red lips and ring of spotless milky teeth, the clear transparent skin and bright eyes. Many far prettier women than she had Roland seen, but not one in which the sense of health and youth, of vitality and strength and freshness was so striking. She made him think of the pure sea wind, the pink bloom on a mountain heath, of anything which was free and bright and natural.

They talked and chatted gaily all through the luncheon. She was always ready with an answer, a new idea with which to meet his question or follow his lead; and he found himself unable to bring up any subject on which she had not already thought and formed her own opinion, and on which she was deeply interested in hearing his.

Time flew by like a moment, and when the lunch was finished and she said she must go, Roland experienced a sort of pain and sensation of blankness which was quite new to him. In vain he tried to keep her with him longer, in vain he spoke of the curiosities and curios he had at his chambers, which he would like to show her; to all his propositions she shook

her head with an irresistible, tantalising, sweet, roguish smile, such a smile! that Roland felt if it lasted another minute he could not check the impulse to seize her in his arms and kiss her all over the rosy, dimpling, laughing face.

"I have sinned against the conventions enough for one day," she said. "Please see me into the motor and let me go. Come to see me soon again."

They stood on the steps of the Savoy together as her motor was called up, and she looked at Roland with pleasure. The fact that he was double her age only attracted her. His hair was still quite black, his grave, quiet, distinguished face, with its good features and clear skin, was only slightly lined. His figure was full of strength, and he held himself easily. Just now his eyes were animated and full of warm pleasure as they gazed upon her. She looked up into them — satisfied. She felt sweep over her that overwhelming satisfaction which a woman feels when she first finds a man to love. So far as she was concerned, the matter was concluded. She chose this man for her own, as the female by Nature was always intended to do. She was to select, to choose out of the many, the one to whom she felt it an honour to submit.

Hilda now put her hand, full of electric fire, into his with confidence. She had no misgiving, no anxiety as to whether he would love her or not. She knew, foresaw that he would. So many men had

been attracted to her already that there was no reason to feel doubtful whether this one — the first she herself had settled on — would do the same.

“Good-bye,” she said, and smiled again; but now she was safely in the motor and the next minute she had gone, leaving Roland with a sense of utter desolation, an extraordinary sense of longing which increased and increased as the magnetism from that warm soft hand ran in fiery circles through his blood. He walked back to his rooms, and there threw himself into a chair and remained motionless, sunk in a painful reverie which was yet shot through with a curious delight.

For the first quarter of an hour he devoted himself to saying over and over again he must not see her, must not think of her, and it was a genuine surprise to himself to find suddenly that from so thinking he had drifted into planning an evening at the theatre with the family, and dwelling beforehand on the pleasure of sitting next to Hilda in the stalls, her bare white shoulder almost touching his.

He must not alarm Mrs. Thorne or she, since she knew his position, would bar him entirely from her daughter's presence; but he had been her friend for so long now, she was aware with what rectitude he had supported his crippled existence, so that as a mere friend to all of them he knew she would welcome him to the house. He wondered if she had told Hilda that he was married. He thought not, or Hilda

would not have given him those looks and smiles that had so intoxicated him. He thought he could feel from her innocent frankness of dealing with him that she took it for granted the way to his heart was clear, and it was nothing to anybody in the world if they fell in love with each other and married within the next three weeks.

Oh, if he could marry her! If he could! If he could! The man felt mad, as a caged lion in his prison. To have the right to clasp her in his arms, that sweet yielding form, and kiss those young lips with their provoking, enchanting smile!

To see a woman like this, that to him was so desirable, and to know that she was already his in mind, in wish, in sentiment, that he had only to say those few necessary words and she would put all the great gifts she had, her life itself, willingly into his hands, was a fierce martyrdom, and one which a man like this had in no way deserved.

That evening he went out and bought the theatre tickets with a strange joy, in spite of his protesting conscience, and wrote the invitation to Mrs. Thorne and posted it himself before he went to bed.

Mrs. Thorne accepted, and they all had a very pleasant evening at the theatre, followed by supper at the Cecil; and when Roland saw them all into the motor afterwards, and pressed the bright-haired Hilda's hand beneath the silk opera cloak, as he drew it round her, he felt his hold on himself was



gone. Unless Fate in some way intervened or Hilda herself withdrew from him, the morass of passion he had seen in the path ahead of him must swallow him up.

All that night he could not sleep; he walked up and down the long continuous suite of his rooms, mad with unavailing regret and desperate longing. He had been right in his conjectures. Mrs. Thorne had told her daughters nothing of his position, and as it was little known in Society and never spoken of, they would not be likely to hear it or learn it except directly from him or her. His few friends who knew of the events of twenty years ago were not the friends of these young girls of the next generation.

Mrs. Thorne rarely spoke of other people's affairs. Left early a rich young widow, pretty and attractive, she found it convenient to be generally silent on the secrets of her acquaintances, and hoped for an equal reticence on their part about herself.

That Hilda would fall in love with Roland did not occur to her. There were so many younger men pressing a useless suit upon her daughter that it hardly seemed likely she would seek one who had already lived out half his life, and in Roland she had a perfect trust and confidence. It never remotely came to her mind that he would do more than regard her children in the same friendly spirit he had always regarded her. She fancied him resigned to his hopeless condition, and far too honourable to try to arouse

in any girl a love to which he could make no honourable return.

In a general way she was right. Roland was a gentleman, with the instincts of one. He was honourable; but that which she did not understand and did not know was the fact that a remorseless passion had fastened its fangs into him and its clinging tendrils round him, and from this very few who are once caught can escape.

As Roland walked up and down now he saw clearly there was only one way in which to save Hilda and himself, and that was to tell her. To go to Hilda and tell her his life was a shattered thing, from the debris of which she must steer clear her way or it would fall upon and crush her. In her innocent uprightness she herself would then probably, when she heard of his marriage, pronounce the final good-bye.

But he struggled in vain to bring himself to the point of telling her. Day after day passed, and they saw each other frequently, for he called at their afternoon tea-time, and sometimes after dinner, and Mrs. Thorne grew accustomed to his being a constant visitor. Always calm and quiet in voice and look and manner, no one seeing him could have imagined for a moment the volcano, the fire, that was burning underneath that calm, nor the hell in which the man was really living.

So far he had not said one word of love to Hilda,

nor indeed had he had the opportunity, for he had only seen her when others were present; her mother, her sister, her sister's fiancé, one or all of them were at the house when he called. She was always perfectly dressed when he saw her, and always impressed him in the same way, sparkling, golden, radiant, like a spring of life itself; full of vitality, of magnetism; soft in her voice and her movements; infinitely alluring and inspiring.

And the man sank deeper and deeper into the toils round him each time he saw her.

One day, when Hilda went up to her bedroom, she found a letter had been put on her dressing-table in her absence, and seeing it was addressed in Roland's handwriting, she took it up with delight. Within her also love for him had risen to a great height; she knew instinctively he loved, admired, and desired her. His quiet unmoved exterior failed entirely to deceive her. She was happy, confident. She believed she only had to wait. He would say what he wished in his own good time.

She opened the note and read:

"DEAR MISS THORNE,—I am leaving town shortly. Will you come here and visit my little museum before I leave? Any afternoon you like to name will suit me.

"Yours sincerely,       ROLAND WEST."

Hilda read this with a quiet smile, then she kissed it, and sent a reply at once by hand.

"I will come to-morrow at three. Thank you so much.—H. THORNE."

To-morrow afternoon her mother was going out with Rose to a reception. She had already declined to go, and said she would stop at home and read Greek. To go to visit Roland would be a delightful variation of this. She would not mention her intended visit to anyone. Perhaps when she came back she would be able to tell them that she was engaged to Roland. She knew nothing about him, nothing as to his position, his income, his past life, nor did she care. She only felt in every fibre of her body, in every cell of her brain, that he was the man she adored, and nothing in the world would be too much to do for or to give him.

When the morrow came, punctually at ten minutes to three she stepped into a taxi, since her mother had taken the motor, and drove to Roland's place. She looked really lovely. She had dressed with the greatest care in a delicate summer silk — for they had reached the last weeks of July now — and love and excitement had painted her face in its fairest colours. Her eyes were large and darkest blue, with fire moving in their depths; her face was very pale except for the rose leaf flush that went and came in her cheeks as her heart beat eagerly.

Roland himself came to the door of his flat and opened it for her. She looked up at him as she put her hand in his, and noticed his face seemed white,

and there was an even more coldly quiet air about him than usual. The door opened into a wide corridor from which again his own rooms opened, also all communicating with each other. The door now of his bedroom was shut, but the large sitting-room and smaller one adjoining, which he had turned into his museum, as he called it, stood open. There were flowers in the corridor and in the rooms.

"It is very sweet of you to come," he said gently, letting his grave gaze fall on her.

"I am so happy in coming," she returned frankly, as they passed into the curio room together. There were a great many wonderful and interesting objects there — gold stuffs and strange daggers and swords from Damascus; ivory and gold images from India and China; exquisitely carved walrus tusks from Alaska — and she examined them all with the keenest interest, listening intently to his description of each object, and the relation of how and when he had acquired it. It was a delight to her to listen to his voice, a delight to be alone with him and know she had his exclusive attention. When they had gone all round the room, which in itself was interesting in its arrangement of dark Oriental curtains and silks and rugs, with the gleam of strange metals and the curious forms of unfamiliar images and idols looking out of the corners, he said she must be tired.

"Come and have tea now," he added, and they passed into the other large room, where she saw tea

arranged on a side table with a spirit kettle and lamp amongst the flowers. She sat down in one of his large arm-chairs, drawing off her gloves; she liked to be there; liked to watch him moving about her with his quiet easy movements. She did not want any other amusement.

They talked on all sorts of subjects, his travels, and some of the engagements he had been in on foreign service, and then she asked him where he was going now; he had said he was soon leaving town.

"I am going abroad for a short time; I don't quite know where yet," he answered.

"I shall miss you so much," she said, just speaking out her thoughts. "I am so sorry you are going. I have enjoyed all the evenings so much that you have been at our place, and all the times at the theatre."

"Will you really miss me?" asked Roland, leaning forward towards her and looking at her, a strange tenseness in his tones.

"Immensely," she answered, the colour coming and going uncertainly in her cheeks, her heart suddenly beating hard. In a moment, before she had in the least realised his intention, Roland was beside her, had bent over her, lifted her completely out of the chair, and was kissing her lips as he held her tightly strained against his breast.

"My darling, my own, do you love me? Do you

like to be in my arms? Would you like to stay always with me?" he murmured, and his voice was quite different from the restrained coldness of a little while back, full of new tones she had never heard till now, and it filled her with a nameless delight.

She put her arms round his neck. "Yes, yes, yes," she whispered back into his ear. "I love you, oh so much."

The electric joy of those moments! The wild magnetism in the circle of that embrace! Roland, as he realised the joy incarnate that he had in his arms, felt his brain go mad with resentment at the chains that held him, that turned this innocent love and joy into a curse and crime. His whole being seemed to writhe and strain under his heavy iron collar that had pressed on him for twenty years.

He let his arms fall and freed the girl suddenly; she sank back in the chair with a sense of bodily hurt; her wrists were strained; there was pain in her breast and mouth. She pressed her handkerchief to her lips; one was a little cut and left a mark on it, Roland noticed it.

"I have hurt you!" he said in a horrified tone, and she saw his face grow paler still. Hilda only laughed.

"It is nothing," she said lightly, tucking the handkerchief away into her sleeve. Her eyes looked back at him blazing with love and joy, and the woman's satisfaction that he loved her enough to hurt her by

his embrace, and enough again to be sorry that he had done so. To him she was wonderful in those moments, a thing seemingly made up all of light and fire and the soft south wind. She was so innocently, gladly, confidently happy. She was not in the least on the defensive. It never occurred to her even remotely that Roland could harm her. She trusted him and his honour so absolutely and completely. She felt no fear, only distress that his face looked so strained and suffering, that her kiss had not given him the same happiness that his had given her.

"Why do you look so sad?" she asked. "Do you care for me very much?"

He was sitting close beside her chair now; his face was near and a little above hers as he leant on the arm of her chair and bent over her. She looked up at it and thought how fine it was with its straight line of eyebrows and nose, the refined mouth and well-cut chin, and the eyes, those large dark eyes, how she felt her soul long to call a happier look into them.

He looked back at her. "Care for you! What a question!" he said half bitterly. "I should like to have you always with me, own you, and have every moment of your time and every thought in your brain belonging to me."

"I think you have that last already," she said in a low tone, and then was silent. She felt it lay in his hands to ask for the rest, and if he felt as he said, she did not understand why he did not ask her to



marry him, as other men had done whom she had had to refuse.

That he might be married already never for one instant occurred to her. To her open nature, to have been with her so much and to have seen, as she guessed he had done, that she loved him, without letting her know that fact, would have seemed dishonourable, and therefore she never connected it with him.

But she fully understood there might be many reasons why a man might love and yet not wish to marry a woman. In fact, she had been brought up in a set which rarely spoke of marriage and love together; she was by nature so unworldly herself that her training had not affected her, but she understood worldly men and women fairly well and the motives which influenced them.

Roland might be looking for money or rank in the girl he married, neither of which she possessed. Therefore she felt she could say nothing. She could but tell him she loved him and leave all else to him.

"While I am away now, will you think of me?" he asked.

"I rarely do anything else as it is," she said, the geranium colour hot in her cheeks, and the red lips parting in her sweet merry smile. "And when you are away I shall think of you all the time, and long for you back, oh so immensely."

She stretched out her arms with the whole move-

ment of intense longing in them, and Roland, wild and crazy with despairing pain, took them and locked them round his neck again and kissed her, but very gently this time, for she was very dear and sacred to him, and her complete unhesitating trust in him was the best and most secure armour she could have had.

She kissed him back, and let her head, with its little silk toque, rest on his shoulder where he had pressed it, and ran her fingers through his dark hair.

"What beautiful hair! How I love it! Ah, Roland, you will never quite understand how much I love you. If I spoke for a thousand years I could not tell you."

And on Roland, starving and aching for love in his lonely life and consumed with passion for this woman from the first time he had seen her, and yet knowing she must ever be beyond his reach, the words fell like burning oil on wounds giving an ecstasy of pain. Still, it was something to have had her lie trustfully, tranquilly in his arms, to have heard those words, to know his empire over her mind was complete. And he saw what love she had to give. In its intensity, its self-surrender, self-abandonment, it was more like the passion of an Oriental woman, only here in such a sweet fresh form that seemed to personify the English summer day.

Hilda was quick to see that for some reason or other, though she did not guess the right one, Roland did not wish to ask her to marry him, nor to tell

her why he did not, and the strained look of agony in his face distressed her.

Perhaps she was unwise in staying, perhaps she was only causing him pain.

"Perhaps I had better go now," she said gently. "I have been here some time, and such a happy time! Thank you so much for asking me. I am so glad, so very glad, to know that you care about me," she added, very softly and shyly. "I adore you, and I would give my life to make you happy." The words were hardly above a whisper, and died on her lips as he pressed them beneath his own.

"My darling, good-bye till we meet again," he answered. "Remember, you and your love for me are the greatest treasures that I prize most in the whole world."

Then he set her free and she rose. She drew on her gloves, and without any more speech on either side, in a tense silence, he accompanied her through the passage downstairs and saw her into a taxi.

Driving home Hilda laid her head back on the cushions and closed her eyes. It was a mystery; she felt sad that all was not clear and bright and open, but the one glorious fact remained shining out in the divinest light — he loved her. She decided within herself that as Roland had not said anything definite to her, and as there seemed something in the circumstances that she did not understand, she would say nothing to anyone of the meeting just

past. He would probably rather have it so. He loved her and had told her so. For the present his words and his kisses should be buried in her own heart in a sacred silence.

A week after Roland left for Paris, and the Thornes were preparing to leave London also for a stay at Clearbrook with Rose's fiancé. Hilda hated the idea of going there; and between the absence of Roland and even letters from him, for he had not written, the heat of London, and the dislike to the approaching visit, she grew pale and looked ill and disconsolate. Mrs. Thorne mentioned this in a letter she sent to Roland. She said Hilda seemed ill, and she hoped the change to the country would do her good. Unfortunately she got on so badly with Bertie Heywood, and so disliked the idea of a visit there, that she was afraid it would lose much of its efficacy.

Some days after this Roland wrote back to Mrs. Thorne and said how sorry he was to hear the bad news of her youngest daughter. He agreed that the visit under the circumstances would probably do her no good, and asked if Mrs. Thorne would allow her to go to his sister in Italy for a month while the others were at Clearbrook. Mrs. Howard, his sister, he added, had recently returned from India and was staying at Como for the season. She had told him she would be very glad to see Hilda there, and be responsible for her, and duly chaperon her, if

Mrs. Thorne liked to let her go. He added, he thought it would make a great change for Hilda and do her infinite good; her first visit to Italy would be so full of interest to her.

To Mrs. Thorne, who had been nervously apprehensive of how Hilda would get on with her future brother-in-law, and of all the possible disagreeables that might occur, and yet could not very well leave her alone in London, this letter brought great relief. It would be the very thing, and solve all difficulties, and Hilda would certainly be delighted. She called her in and read Roland's letter, and Hilda assented joyfully. Roland himself said he could not be there, which was very hard, but, still, to go to stay with his sister seemed a delightful thing to do. He *might* come there after all! It was not at all unlikely. And then to see Italy! To see its mountains and lakes! She had studied Italian, she could speak it quite well. To go out into the world alone, to travel to Italy! her first flight into the open. And to Roland's sister! It was perfect. The colour rushed to her pale cheeks; she clasped her hands with delight.

"Oh, *yes*," she said at once; "write and tell him I should like to go."

"You have plenty of nice dresses, I think," remarked Mrs. Thorne reflectively, that being the point she always considered first. "You had so many this season, they will all do well for September; I think

he says September," she said, re-opening the letter. "Ah, yes, here it is: 'from first September for about a month or six weeks.' Well, you shall go, my dear child, and you must try and enjoy it. I will write to Roland, and then I expect Mrs. Howard will send you the invitation."

From that moment for the next week or two Hilda was all joyous animation. She added to her possessions anything she thought necessary, and on this occasion she shopped, which she generally hated, with great joyous elation.

The formal invitation duly came from Mrs. Howard and was accepted, and with great lookings forward Hilda bought her ticket for Como one sultry afternoon, and waved a merry good-bye to her mother from the carriage window of the Dover express.

### CHAPTER III

As the train drew up at Como station Hilda looked out of the window and up and down the platform. There were a good many people, and a crowd of porters pushing their way between them towards the luggage van with their trucks. Suddenly, as her eyes were seeking for a tall, well-dressed, feminine figure, such as she fancied her hostess would possess, to her intense surprise she saw Roland come through the press of travellers towards her carriage. She gave a little exclamation of joy, and had pushed the door open in a moment. The next Roland was helping her down the steps to the platform. The next they stood side by side, looking at each other with delight.

"Oh, Roland, this is lovely! How is it you are here? I never expected to see you. Where is your sister?"

"She couldn't come," he answered. "What luggage have you? Have you anything in the carriage?"

"Only this," she replied, holding up the small dressing-case she had in her hand; "and one trunk in the van."

"Then we'll drive straight to the hotel; they'll send after the registered luggage," Roland answered. "Come, dear."

He steered her through the crowd, and outside the station a little victoria stood waiting for them. It had been ordered by him apparently, for he got in and helped her in, and the man drove off without any direction being given him.

Hilda thought at the hotel they would find his sister, and private talk would be at an end. It was only these few precious minutes they would have alone.

"Roland, what a heavenly place and evening! Oh what a pity we are not going to be here alone together. How we could enjoy it!"

Roland pressed the little hand that lay beside him on the seat in silence, as the man rattled along over the cobble stones, through the warm pink air towards the lake.

"Did you have a good journey, darling?" he asked, looking at her.

"Yes. Rather a bad crossing, and we didn't reach Calais till after one in the morning, but I slept in the train, and then to-day has been lovely. As we went through Lucerne about four o'clock it looked simply divine; the lake perfectly calm and the mountains all wrapped in a golden sheen. Little steamboats were dashing about on the lake with bands playing on them. It was such a scene of warm, bright beauty; I did



so wish I was coming out to you and we were going to have a honeymoon there."

Roland laughed, and this time his arm slipped round her waist, and he drew her closer to him.

"Then to see you here was such a glorious surprise. Are you going to stay?"

"I'll tell you all about it when we reach the hotel," he said. "There's the lake! Isn't it wonderful?"

The carriage had just turned into the main square. The lake, a shimmering vision of beauty, golden, liquid, glassy, lay before them. The white steamboats, like swans at rest, were lying at their slender piers along the quay. As softest velvet the blue peaks rose round the dreaming lake in a hot golden haze.

"It is like entering heaven itself," she murmured back, and her hand pressed his on her waist in a fervour of enthusiasm.

The victoria turned out of the square, drove along the margin of the golden lake, turned in swiftly through a wide garden, and drew up at the Plinius door. The concierge came out and took Hilda's bag and showed them both to the lift. The lift boy touched his cap and said to Roland: "It's the salon, sir?" and Roland nodded.

The lift stopped at the first floor, and then Roland took her arm gently and drew her over to a door on the other side of the corridor. He opened it and they went in together. It was a beautiful Louis

Seize salon, really decorated, fitted and furnished actually to the model.

Hilda's eyes took in, in this first rapid survey, the heavy blue velvet curtains hanging at the windows and before the doors that opened out of it, the painted ceiling, the two large windows beyond which gleamed the golden sheen of the water, the beautiful furniture, all white-ribbed silk, with small flowers, like the pattern of a Dresden china plate, upon it.

"What a perfect room! Is Mrs. Howard staying here?"

She looked enquiringly at Roland. He looked back at her, and then suddenly her heart beat to suffocation. Her face turned white in the shadow of the room. She leant on the centre table for support; it was laid for tea. A great gilt bowl of roses filled the middle of it. Beside this she noticed *two* cups, *two* plates, only two. Her lips parted and whitened.

"Roland! Where is Mrs. Howard?"

He took a few steps forward and clasped her suddenly in his arms.

"Did you not say you longed to be coming to me? how perfect it would be if we were here alone?"

"Yes, but . . ."

She struggled in his arms, but they were tightly round her.

"What do you mean, Roland? Where is Mrs. Howard?"

"*I am Mrs. Howard,*" and he bent over and kissed her, so that she could not speak.

When at last she wrenched herself free from him she clasped both hands over her heart and stood panting, white-faced, her eyes fixed upon him in a wide horror-stricken gaze.

"But how could you deceive us so, lie to us so, both mamma and me? Do you mean that you have no sister, that there is no Mrs. Howard, that you planned all this, that you meant me to stay with you instead of her?"

Roland folded his arms across his breast and looked back at her steadily.

"Yes, all that."

"How *could* you? I could not have believed it of you."

That was all she expressed in those first moments, that was all she felt, intense surprise. To her own honourable upright nature what he had done seemed impossible.

"I did it to gain *you*; there seemed no other way."

"Did you think I should stay?"

"I believed so, I hoped so?"

"You thought I could not do otherwise?"

For the first time the blood rose in a red flush to his face.

"No. There is no coercion. If you wish, I will take you back now to the station, and you can leave by the evening train. I will give you a letter you

can give to Mrs. Thorne, which will save you all explanations. You are free. It is for you to say what you will do."

"And if I went back now?" Hilda asked, and her voice was hardly above a whisper. "What would you do?"

They were standing facing each other, Hilda with her back to the light, still leaning on the edge of the table for its support, without which it seemed she must fall to the ground. He took her arm now and turned her towards the window, beyond which the water glowed, flushed now with rosy tones under its enchanting veil of gold.

"Do you see those little boats lying at the edge, just for one man to row? When you have left I shall take one of those and row in the darkness to the centre of the lake, and never return."

He felt the wild throb of pain that went through her. She sank away from his arm into one of the chairs by the window.

"Oh, Roland, why *should* you?" She looked at him with staring, terrified eyes. He stood there with the evening light full on him, the personification of strength and life and power, at the acme of human capability and beauty. The thought of death, of destruction, of inertia, of nothingness, in connection with him, seemed incredible and, to the woman who loved him, absolutely unbearable. Looking at him as he stood there, her whole ardent passionate

nature rose up in wild revolt against it. If it had been her life that was being demanded of her for him, at that moment, she felt it would only be a supreme happiness, a rapture, to lay it at his feet.

"Why? Because this life is an absolute hell to me, and without you I don't intend to go on with it. If you are mine, if you love me enough to give yourself to me, I have everything to live for; if not, I have nothing."

There was a moment's silence. Hilda's brain seemed in a circle of fire. What Roland had just said might only be a threat, a powerful argument he was using in his own favour. But she did not think so. He was not a man to threaten or to boast idly or treat words lightly. And in any threat there is, always the possibility that it may be carried out.

The thought came to her like a furious jab of a knife in the flesh, of her returning, the waiting and waiting, and then the news of the accident, the empty boat, and Roland dead.

She covered her eyes with her hand in an agony. It was as if she could not bear to see either of the two roads that faced her.

"Roland, I can't stand it. It will kill me!" She leaned back in the chair; she was colourless. It seemed to her that something in her heart or brain had broken; that she was in reality dying. He was beside her in an instant, his warm arm under her head, her ice-cold hand held against his breast.

"It is so cruel to put me in such a position; it is coercion."

"No, it is not. Hilda, if you love me you will stay now. If you love me we have heaven before us! How could one stand on the threshold of paradise and not go in? how could one be such a fool, such an idiot? But if you don't love me, then you can go back. Why should you worry about me? why think about me at all? I shall be asleep, out of it, not suffering anything; you have a long stretch of life before you, you will meet other men, one that you *do* love, you will be happy. Go back, my darling, now, if you don't feel you love me enough to stay with me; you have no fault, no responsibility. In a month or two this would all seem like a dream to you."

Tears of absolute misery too great for words dropped on to his hand. "Roland," she said, in a suffocated voice, "I adore you, worship you, love is no word for what I feel, but why is it all like this? Do you not care enough for me to marry me? Why can't we marry here somewhere?"

Roland gave a sudden laugh, so bitter, so painful, it rang through her ears long afterwards.

"Is that what you think, that I don't care enough for you? Hilda, if there was any possible way, any conceivable means of doing it, I would marry you, of course, with the keenest joy. But there is *no* way. I was married over twenty years ago. I have been a prisoner ever since, and am now, thanks to

our humane, our natural, and very delightful laws.”

Hilda drew a little further from him back into the deep, white-silk-cushioned chair. He was kneeling now beside her, his arms round her waist.

“You are married! Then I am taking you from your wife?”

“My wife is a mad woman, shut up in an asylum. For twenty years she has lived there. She does not know she is married, she does not know my name, she does not recognise me, only screams when she sees me. But she is my wife, and I can have no other!”

“How awful! how hopeless! This is worse than all!” Her voice was hardly audible, her eyelids drooped over her eyes. It seemed as if she had been receiving blow after blow in a quick succession, and life and hope and the possibility of action had been beaten out of her.

Roland drew back for a moment and looked at her. Pale, with closed eyes, collapsed in the chair, she looked like the mere spectre of the smiling, radiant, rosy-tinted young creature he had met at the station half an hour ago.

Just at that moment the door opened, and the waiter entered with a tray loaded with the teapot and manifold accessories. Roland rose easily to his feet. He was glad the tea had come; it would be a restorative. He was beginning to fear some physical ill would come to the girl, and to reproach himself for answering her questions so truly and so

promptly. Somehow or other he ought to have deferred telling her the truth till she had rested and eaten, not broken it all so suddenly to her when she was tired with a long journey, and after a night of little sleep. He cursed himself all the time he was pouring out the tea for her, and then brought it to her and implored her to drink it and sit up and smile at him and let him take her hat.

Hilda took the tea and drank it, and removed her hat and rested her head back on the white cushion with a little smile. There must be a few moments' truce to all serious issues. The shocks had come so rapidly, one after the other, first the joy of seeing him, then the intense surprise, the grief, and then blacker and still blacker grief, that her brain was stunned beneath them. And yet here seemed joy all about them. How delightful, how perfect, this was! To be sitting here in this exquisite room, filled with the fragrance of the roses, the peace, the quiet, after the dust and rattle and continuous motion of the train, the superb beauty of the scene before the windows, the glory of the light and air, and near her, alone with her, full of love for her, the man she loved, his voice talking to her, drowning all her senses in pleasure.

All the way out here to her supposed hostess she had been dreaming, thinking of him, painting in fancy how delightful it would be if she were coming to him, going to stay alone with him, pass these



golden days in this golden land with him, bask in his smile, feel all her being vibrate with joy at the sound of his voice, be *his*.

She had seen all this in a vision of light. As she had passed through Lucerne she had noted the gay crowds on the steamboats, the young white-clothed girls leaning beside their lovers against the side, and seen herself there with him. She had pictured in fancy being met at the station by him, being taken by him to cool fragrant rooms, and there knowing the rapture of his kiss. She had longed and longed and sighed and thought this a hundred times over, and now, as if a magic wand had been waved across those airy visions, they had become real. All this that she had so dreamed of was here, put into her hands, almost forced upon her. Could she deliberately throw it away?

She stood on the threshold of paradise, looking in. Was it for her to turn away from that open gate? Would it ever in her life be set wide for her again?

She took the tea he brought her and drank it, and also took the toast because he had cut away the crust from it and buttered it for her.

A string band began to play beneath the window, and the sound of the violins and the deep note of the violoncello came into the room, swelling in through the sunlit air. Roland drew his chair very close to hers, and they sat in silence, while the band played with all its own Italian passion and fervour the won-

derful song "Musica Proibita." It was known to both of them, and the throbbing notes of the melody, as they came floating in, seemed to speak to them, also the familiar words. In silence they waited for the last grand final strain, the appealing cry, *Stringemi, stringemi al tuo cuor, fa mi provar l'ebrezza dell'amor* (Press me, press me to your heart, make me feel the intoxication of love), and as it was flung on to the air by the violins Roland suddenly leant forward over her, and caught her to him in an embrace that seemed to the girl to have the agony of death in it.

"Darling, darling, do you love me enough to stay with me? Tell me, shall I have your warm arms round me to-night, or shall I be out there alone in the darkness?"

"You know how I love you, enough to die for you."

"Then live for me. Stay with me now. Let us have paradise for these weeks in the present, and then pay the price that the future may demand of us."

At this moment the thought in his mind was that if difficulties arose he must tear himself away from her, and she must seek the protection and name of another, which he could not give her; the thought in her mind was that if grief and shame and condemnation fell upon her, she could live quietly, humbly, out of the world, but in the sunshine of his love,

dedicating the rest of her life to him. But neither spoke their thought; each feared to tarnish the dazzling splendour of the present, and therefore neither knew the other's view, and from these silences in life much harm arises.

His arms were tightly round her, his dark, brilliant face bent closely over hers, waves of electricity from his ardent, eager touch went rocking through her veins.

"My own, if you wish you shall return. But we must not delay, the train leaves here in less than half an hour. We have time to reach the station if we go now."

He kissed her on her soft, parted lips, and the fire of supreme happiness, of that joy that only comes rarely in a lifetime, and never from any other source than love, of an ecstasy that seemed parting soul and body, took possession of her. It formed her resolution. What price that the future could ask from her would be too great for such a gift as this?

She put her arms round his neck. "I will stay."

"My sweet! My very, very own."

There was silence for a moment in the shaded flower-scented room, as the two warm living hearts beat tumultuously against each other, and from without came the music, now changed into a wild gay dance; it seemed to translate into sound the joyous leap of their pulses.

"How can I ever thank you, repay you?" he mur-

mured. "I hope you will never regret it, never, never."

She put her hand over his mouth.

"Don't speak of regret, or think of the future. This is absolute paradise, as you said. We will have it and enjoy it. We will not say one word or have any thought or apprehension that could spoil it."

There was a certain strength of character in her, more often met with in men than in women, that prompted these words, and Roland noted it. Most women, having bought their happiness at some stupendous price, are then apt to drown it in tears, and weave a shroud of self-reproaches, apprehensions, doubts, and fears for it. They in this way pay dearly for the corpse they buy and swiftly proceed to bury it. But Hilda, like an ancient Greek, having once resolved to buy her joy at some unknown price that she guessed would be commensurate with it, determined that nothing should dim or dull or mar the glittering thing. Afterwards it should shine out a memory of pure gold.

"Come over to the window," she said. "How lovely it is! Oh, Roland, how happy I am!"

They went to the window and stepped out into the small solid grey stone balcony. The mellow peach-coloured light fell over them, the players hailed them from below. Hilda opened her travelling purse and dropped them two francs, and the

men saluted and retuned their violins. There were scarlet cushions laid on the broad stone ledge of the balcony rail, and on these she leaned her arms and looked out across the golden waters of the lake to the giant hills of blue. The six o'clock steamer had just discharged its passengers on the quay, carriages were waiting there to take them to the evening train, her train, the Swiss express for England. It would take them on board, then it would start. . . . But no quiver passed over her face. She had made her decision. The train might go, but it should not bear her away from Roland and this paradise.

"What a bright gay scene, isn't it?" he said. "What would you like to do? Would you like to go out? Would you like to walk or drive or go out on the lake or rest here?"

"What time do we dine?" she asked. She was thinking that this night, the one great night of her life, she would like to look her fairest, put on her loveliest dress, be opposite to him at dinner, a vision of delight.

"Any time you like, my darling. I ordered dinner at seven, but they would change the hour."

"It is about six now. I think I would like to go and dress. I want to look very, very nice for you this evening, Roland."

She looked up at him steadily, though the blood burnt hotly in her cheek, and he flushed too, that quick eager red that she loved, and took her arm.

"Do that if you wish. Come and see your room, and give me your ticket for your registered trunk. I'll send the porter for it."

She gave him the ticket and they stepped back into the salon. Not far from the window heavy blue velvet curtains swung against the wall. Roland drew these back and disclosed a door; he turned the handle, pushed it open, and drew the girl into the room beyond. It was about double the size of the salon, with a lofty painted ceiling and three large windows opening on to balconies beautifully curtained, with lace blinds lowered to soften the glare of the sun. It was one of the most charmingly furnished bedrooms Hilda had ever seen. There were mirrors everywhere, little tables for dressing at, for writing on, little tables covered with roses; there were easy chairs, a low wide sofa, and, under curtains of transparent lace, a double brass bed covered with a gold silk resai. Out of this room opened a large and luxurious bathroom, white-tiled, fitted with a colossal bath in white, with small washing stands, with chairs, and sparkling with mirrors.

Roland bent over her. "This is our room," he whispered.

The girl stood irresolute in the centre, her heart engulfed in great waves of passionate delight. She could not answer. She turned and kissed his hand that rested on her shoulder.

"I will leave you here. You will like perhaps to

bathe and brush your hair. Your trunk will be here directly, and the man will set it in the small room which opens out of the bathroom."

Then he kissed her and retreated to the curtains; she heard him re-enter the salon and the door close after him. She was glad at that moment to be alone, to realise her own happiness. She stretched out her arms involuntarily, her heart seemed swelling beyond the confines of her bosom. Oh, how wonderful it was to be here, thus suddenly alone with him. Free from all restraint, able to talk to him without interruption, to pass hour after hour alone with him, to gaze upon him, to see him moving about her. Her joyous thoughts seemed to rush at her, besiege her. She was like one to whom, starving, a hundred hands are suddenly outstretched with food.

She would have liked to sit down in one of those deep chairs and have thought and thought by herself, but she knew she must not; there was only an hour in which to dress, and she felt that pressing need to enhance her charm in every way, to triumph in herself and her beauty, which forms so large a part of every woman's passion. She ran to the long mirror in the wardrobe and looked at herself critically. She had dressed carefully on the train, thinking of the coming meeting with his sister, and she looked well in her tight-fitting grey travelling gown, but not as beautiful as she would look presently in her satin skin bodice and sleeves and the silks and jewels

of the evening. She hastily undid the jacket, took it off and threw it on a chair, then the skirt, and was about to throw that on another, when two yellow portmanteaux and a suitcase, standing against the wall on the far side of the large room, caught her eye. She stopped, still gazing at them. They were *his*. Of course this room was theirs, not hers alone. In fact, she could not tell how long he had occupied it before she came; she saw now on the far table by the third window a man's brushes lying and a collar-box. Beyond hung a silk dressing-gown, and another swift glance round showed her a patch of light blue, his sleeping suit, behind the curtains on the bed.

She was not in her own territory; she was but an invited guest, and must behave as such. She trembled in every limb and muscle, and snatched up her hastily-flung-down garments, and, folding them into the smallest compass, laid them neatly on one cane chair at the foot of the bed. Then she stood for a moment, the crimson blood tearing across her face, gazing at the luggage. It helped her to realise things, it made her do so. Events had hurried along so, one after the other, so many things had been told her, thrust into her brain, so much passion, surprise, and excitement had swept over her since she arrived that, as in a state of disease the eyes see parts of an object and not the whole, the half of a written letter and not all of it, her mind was not in its usual work-



ing order, and she did not realise fully the whole significance of things.

As she gazed at the yellow trunks now an immense delight filled her; it seemed to flow like some enchanted balm over her, inundate her whole being. How wonderful it was to think that she belonged to him, was part of him, was going to share this room with him. Then as she would willingly have given way to this reflection, another thought hammered suddenly on the door of her mind. If it were his room, he would certainly want to come in to dress for dinner himself at least a quarter of an hour before seven. Her time was still more limited than she thought. She must be ready by a quarter to. She could not, no, she could not be there dressing when he came in. With her heart seeming to thunder in its great beats against her breast, and her limbs trembling with a sort of dancing joy, she flew about her dressing, letting all her torrent of shining hair down about her shoulders, and then redoing it with fast and ceaselessly moving fingers. The glass before her gave back an image so radiant with joy that the most perfect beauty of feature could not have surpassed it in loveliness.

There are doubtless many women to whom their honeymoon brings no such mad rapture of feeling as it did to Hilda. Certainly those who marry for worldly gain, for money, for rank, for position, do not feel this peculiar joy of the senses and the brain.

This happiness that involves equally every fibre of the body and every cell of the mind, this divine, sweeping pleasure that invades the whole mental organisation and the whole physical system simultaneously, is the gift of love alone.

The women who attain by marriage the goods of the world doubtless find much joy in them; it is to be hoped they do. For the loss of the overwhelming happiness which filled Hilda in these moments needs some weighty compensation.

Her hair just finished, she heard the trunk being brought into the room beyond the bathroom, and after it had been left there she ran to it and got out all that she needed for that evening. Then she hastily turned on the water in the huge bath, threw off her clothes, and jumped in.

A mirror faced the bath, and she could see herself as she slipped beneath the water. A vibration of the keenest pleasure ran over her as she realised the perfection of her own beauty. Every line of her figure was faultless; in its dazzling whiteness, in its perfect grace of line, it startled and rejoiced the eye of the beholder. As the warm waves closed up high round her throat, dark thoughts, all the misery of the revelations that Roland had made, came back to her.

"He is married; never, never can he marry me;" but then hope, which is so unkillable in the youthful heart, whispered: "He loves you, he will never want

to part with you. Some women are married without being loved; you are loved without being married; how much better a fate!" and she smiled again, and would not think of anything but the passing moment, the urgent need to make herself beautiful, wonderful, for that one evening. Afterwards, whatever happened, she would have secured this memory of having once known the acme of earthly delight.

On the other side of the closed door Roland paced up and down on the white silk-like carpet of the floor, with its wealth of Dresden-china flowers, in a flame of passionate feeling that allowed neither self-reproach nor apprehension to come near him. He had always held the theory that if a man had decided to do a bad or dangerous thing to please himself, it was absurd to allow his conscience or his fears to prevent him getting the pleasure he was seeking. If one was to be miserable over one's wrongdoing, one might as well be miserable over doing one's duty.

So now, though he was quite aware that all he was doing, all he had done already to obtain Hilda, would be considered a crime in the eyes of the world of the blackest sort, he would not allow a remorseful thought to come near him. For twenty years he had lived in hell, quietly doing all that the world and all our monstrous conventions dictated. He was tired of it. He had deliberately flung it all behind him, and determined to take a little pleasure from the

hands of Nature before he died, whatever the price. He loved Hilda as much as any man *can* love a woman who has stirred in him such a rage of passionate desire as she had in him, but that is comparatively little. For the soul of intense passion is selfishness, just as the soul of love is unselfishness, and passion will not stand being dictated to and frustrated by love.

Roland knew very well that as our civilisation stands at present, both he and Hilda would have to pay heavily for their pleasure now, but his passion would not allow him to listen to the pleading of his love to shield her from the possible evil to come.

They would be each other's, and would know supreme happiness together, and he was glad with an unclouded gladness that would have been impossible to him had he loved her more and desired her less. She would be his, and afterwards the world might fall upon them and crush them both, but nothing on earth would alter the satisfaction of that thought.

He looked at his watch; it was just the half-hour after six. The Swiss express had gone, and a little smile swept over his face as he realised this. How he had wondered, before she had come, whether that train would take her away from him. And if it had he would have gone to the lake, as he had told her, and ended his existence. He had come to that point of desire for her that had he seen her go from him it would have finally broken the will and power to

live. With some natures suffering protracted beyond a certain limit saps the mental power to continue living, just as disease protracted beyond a certain limit causes the collapse and death of the body.

Half-past six? He would not disturb her till ten minutes before the dinner hour. Roland, though, from his unhappy position, he had had comparatively little to do with women, yet knew intuitively much about their wishes and feelings, and he knew the intense pleasure it is to a woman to feel the power of her own beauty in the presence of the man she loves. He wanted Hilda to have this pleasure, and he would not hurry her or disturb her in her toilet.

The head waiter came in to lay the dinner. The salon was so beautiful in all its appointments and arrangements that it seemed a pity to disfigure it by a large table permanently in the centre. Therefore for each meal a round table was carried in by two waiters and carefully removed afterwards, the small white silk and embroidered tables with their golden bowls of roses being restored to their places in their turn.

As the men entered to arrange the dinner, Roland stepped out into the balcony, and with arms folded on its cushioned wall gazed towards the crimson and glittering surface of the lake. Twenty years ago he had had a honeymoon with Lilian West, but across the space of twenty years he remembered perfectly

his feelings had not been anything similar to his emotions now. The unutterable longing that enwrapped him, body and soul, for Hilda, had never been equalled in strength by any other feeling in his life before.

And when the onrush of passion or any other emotion is as great as this, the victim does not seek to excuse or vindicate his action to himself. The world may condemn him as it will; he knows within himself he is absolutely helpless, knows he can offer no resistance to the colossal power overshadowing him. As well might the apple in the orchard begin to make excuses for its fall when the stupendous law of gravity calls it to the ground!

Roland simply felt nothing except an overwhelming, overmastering sense of triumph which, while it seemed to set his brain on fire and make his heart swing uncertainly in his breast, left him perfectly calm exteriorly, and with only an anxiety to safeguard his position in every possible way, and to prolong Hilda's stay with him to the last possible limit.

After a few moments he took a telegraph form from his pocket, a pencil from his watch-chain, and with quick firm fingers wrote. "Have arrived safely, writing to-morrow.—HILDA." He addressed the form to Mrs. Thorne, and then took it himself to the telegraph office. He was not absent more than about fifteen minutes, and as he re-entered the room

and closed the door Hilda stepped into it from the bedroom, between the velvet curtains.

He paused gazing at her, and her expectant eyes saw all in his face that she so longed to see. The look in those dark flashing eyes as they travelled swiftly over her was like a draught of intoxicating wine.

She had put on a dress of palest mauve, of that soft appealing shade that suggests mystery, the glow of inexplicable passion and desire; its material seemed like gossamer, and clung to her and gave out a faint silken sheen as she moved. There was green and gold embroidery round the neck and arms, and on the transparent, warm whiteness of her bosom glowed, like a spot of green fire, an enormous emerald. It was an elaborate and beautiful dress, the most elaborate she possessed, and she had chosen it deliberately for its Oriental richness and splendour. She was only twenty-two, and she had no need as yet to dress in simple girlish clothes to make herself look young. As it was, all the wonder and charm of her exquisite youth was concentrated in the delicate rose-tinted, rounded face, with its radiant eyes and the fair waving masses of her hair, piled up on her head beneath a tiny fillet of green and mauve.

She had purposely rejected all her white evening gowns for this night, though she had one or two which, in their white satin lace and pearls, would have passed easily for a wedding dress. But why

should she put on a wedding gown when there was to be no wedding? Why suggest that function of our modern life which is so often horribly profaned? which generally has so little to do with love? Doubtless Roland's first wife had been in white and orange blossoms when she had riveted him firmly to the torture of twenty years. And no white should wound his eyes with its glare to-night. She had no wish to suggest the conventional bride, and she did not. She looked like a young empress coming to her kingdom, the greatest of all the world, the empire of love.

And Roland understood all the subtle caressing meaning of her dress, for they had talked of colour before, and had agreed that violet in all its shades was the colour of mystery, and therefore the colour of passion, which is the greatest mystery of life.

"Do I please you?" she said, holding out her arms to him, arms the colour of milk with snowy dimples round each elbow, and Roland made no answer at all, only went forward with a single step and caught her to his breast, straining her there, till she cried to be released.

"My sweet, I must go and dress, or I shall keep you waiting. Sit down and rest now or you'll be so tired," he said, drawing one of the large chairs to the window, and she sank gratefully into it.

Opposite her was a little table with carved gilt legs standing against the wall, its top was marble,



and above it rose nearly to the ceiling a gilt-framed mirror; in its shining crystal she saw the glorious image of herself, all white and rose and golden, rising out of the silken shimmering folds of her dress. She looked back at it with intense rejoicing. And why? Simply because it was such a perfect gift to give to Roland.

What an unselfish thing really female passion always is! It is always in the main the pure delight of giving. Roland now thought of nothing but the intense joy he felt in her possession, but she, sitting there entranced, spellbound in a happiness such as she had never dreamed could exist, thought not of herself at all, but only of him and the supreme delight the divine favour it was to know she could and was going to make him happy, give him something he intensely desired, and that she herself saw to be lovely and worthy to give. A woman's love, however erring, must always be a holy and beautiful thing, for in its essence it is the desire not for her own but for another's joy. Her delight all sprang from this, the thought of his delight in her.

He had been sad and lonely and miserable in his life. It was reserved for her to make him happy, to call the wonderful look of elation and joy to his face, that flashed there whenever his eyes rested on her. This was the use of youth and beauty to a woman, to make another happy.

She thought of her sister Rose; she had other

views of life. She was deliberately going to give *her* youth and beauty in exchange for a large stone house and a certain number of acres of land; she loathed and abhorred the man she was going to marry. Simply for money she would give herself to his arms. To Hilda it seemed so frightful, and yet the world, all their society, which spoke of the woman in the streets with horror, would acclaim her sister's act. What was it but simple prostitution, made doubly horrible, made blasphemous, by all the vows to honour and love which Rose would make so glibly in church. And the world would be there and say it was well done, and she would be considered pure and perfect, and certainly not called a prostitute, though she was one. And this same world would stone Hilda to death if it ever discovered her love for Roland. Her sister's fiancé too, Heywood, because he had never loved a woman in his life, but contented himself with wallowing in the lowest vice, with the lowest creatures a man can pay, until he was diseased through and through in mind and body, this man the world would also receive and accept and applaud, though for his one overwhelming love for Hilda, Roland would be branded and condemned.

She passed her hand suddenly over her eyes. "Why do I trouble to think about the world?" she murmured. "I could never accept its judgments and its dicta as right."

And she slipped back into the rapture of thinking

about Roland, of how gladly she would give her life for him if necessary, of how no sacrifice he could demand of her could be anything but a joy to her.

Within the time he had allowed himself Roland re-entered the room, and Hilda, looking up as the door opened, and letting her eyes rest on the fine figure and on his face, naturally so handsome and now glowing with intense animation, felt her brain swim and all her heart and soul lifted up with intense delight. She rose involuntarily, as one trained in court life rises for royalty, for the imaginative woman in her love always sees her lover through a panoply of royalty, which she weaves round him, if not of divinity.

He came up to her, and she saw him advance with a beating heart; the light in the room was very soft now, mellow rich, and dim; the scent of the roses hung in it everywhere, and through the beautiful surroundings of the apartment she watched him approach her, marvelling at the divine happiness she felt. For the first time she was realising now what Life can be; for the first time she touched its Soul.

This joy that two human beings have it in their power to give to each other, how far surpassing everything else it is. Successful work, gratified ambition, satisfied vanity, all else that the earth holds for man, fails to equal it. It is reserved for love alone to remain the great consolation, the supreme and ample compensation for all the misery and pain of

human life. Its presence when with him, the hope for it before it comes, the memory of it when past, these are and will always be the indestructible ties that bind man to life through all his suffering. Ties of living gold, that hold him a willing prisoner.

Roland came up, sat on the arm of her chair, and looked down on her with dark kindling eyes. She looked up into them; how beautiful they were, those deep lustrous wells of darkness with that mysterious fire moving in their depths.

"Are you sorry now I am not Mrs. Howard?" he asked in a low tone. "You seemed angry a little while ago." He was smiling, and a breathless smile parted her red lips too as she raised her arms and put them round his neck.

"No, Roland, I don't believe I was angry. You are too beautiful to be angry with, but I was so surprised. I don't see how you could do it all."

"I did it to attain *you*. I would do a great deal, and so would most men for that," Roland answered quietly. "You spoke of being willing to give *your* life for me; well, I have done more, I have *given* my honour. I have done what everyone would call a dishonourable and blackguardly action. Like Faust, I have sold my soul for you."

A wave of sorrow which was yet half-triumphant joy rushed through her. Their lips were very close together, and they met and rested now on each other's in a long pressure.

"It is worth it," was all Roland added when he lifted his head again.

"Come into the balcony," he said next, "while they lay the dinner;" and they stepped out into the glory of the sunset, side by side. The lake was now crimson and, where a ripple showed on its sheeny surface, scarlet. It glowed like some rare and wonderful jewel flashing out light from its breast, and set in its encircling dark blue hills. No scene could be more exquisite, and no two than these more fit and able to appreciate it. They leant on the cushions of the balustrade, filled with a pulsing tide of joy and life, and without speech let their vision lose itself in the glory of earth and sky. Everything was dipped in rose: the square white sails of the boats widespread, though there was but the tiniest infant breeze, were pearly rose; the white buildings, half buried amongst their glossy green foliage which line the rising sides of Como, were rose-tinted also; the air itself was warm transparent rose. The sun had gone, but the wondrous afterglow was left, telling of a fair tomorrow.

"Dinner ready, sir. Shall I light the lights?" came a respectful voice behind them, and they turned to follow the obsequious waiter back into the salon.

The lights were turned on, a fine shower of electric burners they were, hanging over the centre table, lovely in its grouping of flowers and sparkling with silver and glass. Two waiters stood at the side

table superintending the tureen, and the head waiter sidled up to Roland and murmured:

“Champagne, sir?”

That sweet picture of their little salon and the radiant table where she and Roland — ah, the joy of it — would dine alone together, stamped itself with inconceivable minuteness into Hilda's brain. For years afterwards she could call it up at will; she could see again distinctly each piece of the white silk furniture, each marble and gilded table, each mirror, each graceful golden bowl of flowers. The very position and attitude of the two waiters serving out the soup with solemn precision, at that side table with the silver spirit lamp burning behind them to keep the plates hot, was photographed on her memory.

Roland sent the man away perfectly happy with his order for the best wine on the list, and then held her chair himself until she was seated.

It needed all his self-control to keep him from throwing his arms round her then, as she took her place, so exquisite were the lines of her waist and back as she drew the chair forward under the table, so softly dimpled were the shoulders that rose above the silken folds of violet, and so white the breast where the single emerald glowed, and a lovely vision she made sitting opposite him, with her eyes all light and fire and set wide as he had never seen them, and the rose colour pulsing gently in the cheeks and

glowing vividly scarlet in the lips. It was the loveliness of love that she had then, and Roland knew this, for her face, pale, tired, ennuyé, as he had sometimes seen it in her home, though to him always interesting, had no real beauty at all; but joy and love transfigured her, and to a man there is no beauty so moving as this sudden glamour of loveliness, this wonderful illuminating and painting of eye and cheek and lip by passionate love for himself which he has stirred and excited, which gives her over to him in a loveliness that only he has caused, and is for him alone.

When the champagne had been brought in its clanking ice-pail, and the head waiter had filled both glasses, Roland lifted his with a smile on his brilliant vivid face.

"I propose the health of Mrs. Howard," he said, looking at her over the glass; and Hilda flushed and trembled and hardly knew if the crisis of feeling within her were joy or pain as she drank the toast with him.

The dinner was perfect, and perfectly served by the three noiseless waiters.

It seemed to Hilda curious that everything should so bend and lend itself to the whole glamour of this evening. Life is generally so full of rough points and hard edges that no pleasure in it is ever wholly smooth. But here there was nothing to jar, every golden moment played its due part in the perfect

whole, and it came as a dim warning to the girl, like some far-off voice, that for anything so complete in its joy, for such a flawless jewel as this one evening in the hand of Time, Fate in the balance of things, in accordance with that law that says "no one shall enjoy without penalty," would demand some tremendous price. But it could not cloud her brain; she felt neither fear, nor hesitation, nor regret. She was well content to pay.

When the dinner was over, a bright sparkling hour, during which the glance of his eyes, that keen, passionate gaze, on her, had sent more fire through her veins than the wine, or the lights, or the scent of the flowers, and the servants had at last withdrawn finally, leaving the coffee on the table, Roland rose from his chair and came to her with his arms outstretched, and she rose also and stepped forward to him, overwhelmed in that great longing to be crushed in them, to be killed if necessary and he so wished it, to die in his embrace and under his kiss.

That night, shortly before the dawn, she awoke suddenly; sound was all about her, divine sound, such as it seemed she had never heard before. She opened her eyes, and the room, which, when she had closed them, had been in utter darkness, was now full of a wonderful vague misty light. Tremulous, wide-eyed, buoyed up with an ecstatic sense of joy, she lay still, listening. Whence came that glorious



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sound that vibrated in such sonorous beauty through the silver room? For all was silver now about her, a soft dull silver radiance was diffused in all the air. The moon had risen and was shining on the lake and all beyond the windows, but these were veiled with white filmy lace of curtain and blind, though they stood open, and no bright lines nor harsh squares of moonlight came in on wall or floor to glare out of the blackness; soft sheeny light was everywhere, with the waves of this glorious sound rippling through and through it. She lay there in a confused delight of the senses wondering at it, and then realised it was the sound of bells, the cathedral bells of Como, which surely are the most beautiful and pathetic-voiced bells in the world.

At various hours in the night they ring out, startlingly weird and sad, but full of the sweetest cadences that ever fell on human ear. It was no mere striking of the hour; it was a phase of melody repeated over and over in different tones, exquisitely melancholy, and yet enfolding a sort of rapture.

To the girl waking suddenly from sleep on that night of all nights, it seemed as if heavenly voices were calling to her from some enchanted land. Her soul seemed to mount upwards, borne on celestial wings, and float in ecstasy on that flood of melody that poured through the silver light round her bed.

Roland lay beside her, but she had no thought of waking him. In its moments of most intense delight,

in its holiest raptures, in its wanderings above the starry realms that lie above the earth, the Soul must ever be alone. And so, mute, motionless, enwrapt in the most divine happiness, she lay there cradled in silver light and sound, while the bells of Como pealed in their sad melody across the sleeping lake.

## CHAPTER IV

THE water as it lapped against the shore broke into wavelets of purest gold, and through the heart of it, far out in the centre of the lake, it was deep crimson, thrilled through with the fires of the sunset.

There was no ruffling of the surface because there was no wind, but the whole seemed to sway and pulse and dimple with iridescent colours thrown on to it from the glowing glory of the sky. From west to east above, spreading over the zenith, flamed one deep tone of rose, and in this, towering magnificently above the blue mountains of Como, lifted themselves range after range of snowy nimbi, great pyramidal masses of white cloud, curiously built up in vapour in the form of colossal towers, and all of these were on fire with golden light flushed through with crimson and rose. The sky was magnificent, awe-inspiring, in its pomp of colour, and the whole reflection of its majesty was given back by the limpid depths of the lake. Down deep through the clear blue tint of the water penetrated the fiery red, and the perfect image of the soft rosy white cloud-towers shimmered and swayed in it.

A short distance from Cadenabbia, beneath the sky of regal colour and on this gleaming rainbow surface of the golden lake, passed a little motor-boat, making its way to the willow-fringed steps of Bellagio.

Within the slight, glass-panelled cabin sat Hilda and Roland, leaning back on the cushions and absorbed in the pageant of glowing splendour around them.

To Hilda it seemed that Life was revealing itself in lights and colours of which she had never dreamed; not singly, one by one, as is generally the case, had pleasures peeped out at her half shaded by corresponding griefs and care, not gradually and with effort was she learning to appreciate life, as most human beings have to do, but quite suddenly all the wonderful charm and joy of it had been opened out to her astonished eyes. Ever since the moment when she reached Como station the time had been one long enchantment. Coming from ordinary London life and environment, Como, at the height of its season, in its blaze of natural beauty, with its richly wooded sides, its myriad gardens, its orange and magnolia-covered slopes, its blue mountains, and gleaming reflections, is in itself a *mise en scène* of unequalled splendour; and brought suddenly here and blessed by the exquisite glory of sky and earth, she had known these glorious hours which only love — and passionate adoring love — can give.

It had not disappointed her; the ecstasy of rapture she had felt that first evening was with her still. Mind and body together in her were like some splendid musical instrument, ready to vibrate in glorious melody the moment the hand of its owner calls it forth. Roland had not disappointed her; if she had loved him before, she worshipped him now in that grateful idolatry which one human being owes and gives to another through whom it has known the extreme of pleasure and delight.

There had been a few moments of anger between them already, a dark spot in the otherwise cloudless hours, and that was when he had wanted her to write to her mother a letter giving her a fictitious account of her meeting with Mrs. Howard, her arrival, and so on. He had put the paper before her and the pen into her hand, and insisted that she must write. But Hilda had drawn back white and trembling.

"I can't do it, Roland; I can't write all those lies," she had repeated to all his persuasions.

"Well, when you decided to stay with me last night, what did you intend to do about your mother?" asked Roland coldly. "You can't leave her without writing. If you do, you will cause her great anxiety; she will wire about you, and eventually, if you don't answer, she will send or come after you."

"I did not think about it at all last night," returned Hilda, white with distress; "but I see I can't

do it now. I would rather throw myself into the lake."

Roland took the pen from her with an exclamation of anger. "Then you force me to write for you, that's all."

"But she knows your handwriting!"

"No, I shall disguise it. I shall write as my sister. I shall say you have badly sprained your wrist and can't write, and I am writing for you to let her know you have arrived safely. But it's absurd sophistry on your part not to write yourself. However, if you won't, leave the room; I can write better when I am alone."

Hilda, torn in an agony of distress, had gone away noiselessly to throw herself on the bed in the adjoining room, and Roland had sat down to compose the necessary tissue of lies and omissions for the benefit and comforting of Mrs. Thorne. He had been very angry with Hilda for this — to his eyes — absurd distinction between her deceit and his, but in reality there was a distinction which the finer female sense could appreciate if he could not. For Hilda, to lie to her mother to whom she owed filial gratitude and allegiance, was far more serious than for Roland to do so, who owed her nothing at all; and Mrs. Thorne would suffer more in discovering her daughter had lied to her than her daughter's lover.

On finishing the letter Roland had gone out to post it, and then for a walk on the margin of the

lake. He was still angry. But as no man can remain angry very long with the woman he desires, except to his own loss and detriment, Roland returned very soon, and, as is the way with lovers, the anger was soon suffocated with kisses and strangled to death in embraces. Since then no word had been spoken of the incident, and no other shadow had fallen between them.

Hilda was in that state of blind worship of Roland which made it impossible for her to resist or even criticise any of his actions, to resent or contradict anything he said, and she possessed for him that strange glamour that enfolds all dangerous and forbidden things. Seated beside her now, his arm was beneath her head, and he looked at her more often than at the majestic grandeur of the lake and sky, and whenever she caught the glance of those warm dark eyes upon her, everything seemed to grow suddenly more radiantly lovely; water and sky more brilliant, the slopes more fervently green, the white villas shone like pearls, and the great hotels looked like fairy palaces in enchanted gardens. To every scene, however full of beauty, love gives the last magic touch of all.

"How wonderfully lovely this is, Roland! Is it the most beautiful place in the world?" she asked, looking up at him.

"Yes, I think perhaps it is. I have seen an immense number of places in the world, and this is

one of the loveliest. That is why I chose it for *us*;" and he pressed her close to him in the cradle of his arm as the boat passed on over the ripples of living gold towards the stone flight of steps at the Bellagio landing. Hilda smiled up at him.

"It was clever of you! and the weather is marvellous. Did you have that made for us too?" she added, laughing. "One might be here a thousand times, I suppose, and not see such a sky, such a sunset as this. Look at those glorious cloud-towers turning crimson, look at the water! It is like pure golden oil!"

The boat came gently to the lowest stair, and as they landed the sky seemed to flare up in a still richer riot of colour, and the mellow peach-coloured light bathed them and the white buildings and flower-filled gardens of Bellagio as they went slowly up the steps.

Como is the lake of gardens. Villa, hotel, and cottage vie with each other to enrich its lovely margin with magnolia, willow, mimosa, and palm, and every little landing-stage has its belvedere, its pergola, running along the edge of the water, covered with rose or clematis, or the tender mauve of the wistaria.

A band was playing at the Grand Hotel, and thither Roland and Hilda bent their steps to take their afternoon tea at one of the little tables set about in those glorious gardens which command,



across the golden waters of the lake, a view of the snowy Alps.

"Shall we take this one? It looks quite classic," Hilda asked, laughing.

Within a circle of rose trees, trained over a light trellis-work, stood a round marble table a little apart from the others, and near it, half hidden by climbing roses, stood a statue of Pan playing on his pipe. In front ran the low stone balustrade which separated the gardens from the lake; and over its golden sheen, far at the end, the mountains rose enthroned in their eternal glory against the glowing sky.

They took their seats, and through the light screen of roses watched the other couples passing to and fro, or seated at other tables near them. There were numbers of people, a brilliant, well-dressed crowd, and Hilda let her eyes rest on them curiously. There were so many girls, in outward semblance like herself, in white lace dresses and large hats, and with white gloves and sunshades; she wondered whether many or any of them were as full of excited joy, of pulsing happiness, as she was. She thought not, and she was right, for happiness is less in what we do, and what we have, than in what we are. Hilda's senses and perceptions were all so quick, so keenly alive to impressions; her eyes so sensitive to beauty, her nerves to sensations, that she was able to get a rarely distilled, fine essence of delight from things

that, to a lower, duller organisation, could only have brought very ordinary satisfaction.

To many women who walked in that garden that evening the sunset was but a meaningless mass of colour; the music a droning sound; and the men who walked beside them mere dumps of convenient clay who would pay their bills for them and ask for a stupid thing they called love in return.

For such as these, and the world is full of them, life must indeed be a different thing from what it is to the artist and the poet, to women like Hilda, whose eyes see in the opaline clouds the gleaming walls of paradise, to whom music is a transcendent joy, whose heart beats with pleasure at the sweet note of a flute, and swells with ecstasy in the grand roll of the orchestra, and to whom her lover is a king, an emperor, a divinity, whose lightest touch or word can move her soul, who seems to her eyes to possess all the beauty and charm she has ever imagined.

To a nature like this life is manifolded a hundred times; everything in it is intensified; the joys that are there are multiplied, and many others that for some people do not exist at all are brought into it, invented by the enthusiasm of the brain.

For a man to love such a woman as this is also to draw near the divine fire that exists in human life, and Roland felt it. In her passionate worship of him, in her enthusiastic delight in love and existence,

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she poured through his veins too her own electric joy.

When they had finished tea they strolled back towards their boat that floated gently against the Bellagio steps. The air was full of a warm purple light, the gorgeous colours of the sky were now in deeper shades all mirrored before them. The blue mountains round were taking on more velvet tones. Cadenabbia opposite them sparkled like a jewel in the rosy glow, nestling amongst its green foliage on the margin of the glittering lake.

Roland gave the word to the boatman, who set his motor in motion, and they stepped into the boat, Hilda hardly able to notice where she placed her feet, so absorbed were her eyes and all her senses in the dream of colour round her.

Roland led her over the benches and past the motor into the frail little cabin at the end, and there, as the motorman attended to his work and the boat shot out like an arrow over the gleaming surface to the centre of the fiery lake, he took her into his arms and pressed her head down on his shoulder.

Red and gold and purple were now all round them; far out on the centre of the great expanse, away from the green shore, the boat glided swiftly on, supported, surrounded, overhung by flaming brilliance. The music, mingled with the scent of flowers, came out to them in soft waves of melody and fragrance; the light dropped very, very gradually; violet tones diffused themselves in it; and above them,

silver and radiant, shone out the great evening star.

Long before they could reach Como night would have drawn its dark curtains across the purple sky, and a myriad stars would be shining in the black depths of the lake, while along all its shores lesser lights would be sparkling in the gloom; and, as if to protect her from the approaching night, Roland drew her closer and closer to his breast.

Days passed, those gay and shining days, leaving each one of them upon her the vision of beauty, of warm skies and fairy landscapes. One day they drove to the Villa d'Este, and amongst its cypresses Roland told her of Hadrian's Villa, near Rome, where he hoped one day to take her; and another day they went up Brunate, and from the highest peak, far above the tourist hotels, watched the sunset flare all along the Alps and burn over the plains of Milan.

Every day he planned out a fresh excursion, a new amusement for her, and each hour was so full of joy to her that it seemed almost sometimes a physical strain to go through so much happiness. Since that first quarrel, in which he had given way to her, no harsh word had been uttered between them. The enormous debt of pleasure that each owed the other, and the necessity each felt of the other, outweighed all other considerations.

They spoke very little of the future. It was set-

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tled that Roland had to go with his regiment to Egypt, and Hilda asked him if she might go there too. To live together would be, of course, impossible; but Roland assented to the idea that she might come out on a visit to some friends of his, so that they might meet, and he promised her to try and arrange this.

She had also once, in one of their close embraces, asked him what was to happen in the future if another life sprang from their joyous hours, but to this he had refused to give any answer at all.

"Don't let us think of it," he had said passionately. "When the time comes we will see what we can do." And as his will was law to her, she made no further reference to it, only in her own thoughts she saw herself always his and separated from the world, living in some little villa at Alexandria or Helwan, near enough to Cairo for Roland to come to her secretly whenever he might wish. And she was quite happy, overwhelmed with pleasure in the present and facing the future single-heartedly, with brave self-reliance and confidence. Letters came occasionally from home addressed both to Mrs. Howard, and to Miss Thorne, care of Mrs. Howard, and as Roland and she were staying there as a married couple of that name the letters were duly brought to her.

Mrs. Thorne excused herself from writing very much or very often, she was so busy getting Rose's

wedding things; she was glad to hear Hilda was so well and happy; hoped her wrist was getting better, etc. Roland answered all letters as soon as they came with military precision and dispatch, and everything went smoothly and seemed to shelter and favour the passion and joy of the lovers.

Only the time was against them in its relentless march past. The terrible day came at last at the end of five perfect weeks, when Roland said she must go back. Hilda looked round the beautiful room which had been the shrine of such delight with swimming eyes. It was over, that wonderful time, never again to be equalled in her life, for never again would she have the same gifts to give to any man that she had given to Roland there. It was over, those sunny mornings when they had taken breakfast together, sitting so close she was almost on his knees, with the gay murmur of Como and the steamer's calls coming from the lake without, summoning them to the sun and the glittering water to their waiting boat or carriage; those delicious afternoon home-comings to the cool, fragrant room when, weary with noise and movement and colour, they returned from some expedition gratefully to the peace and privacy of this retreat, and sank side by side on the white silk, Dresden-flowered couch; those sparkling evenings when they drew up to the gay table and she felt his eyes glow in their gaze on her beauty, which she had taken such pains to enhance and frame in beautiful

toilettes for him; evenings when the band played gaily beyond the open windows and the cool splash of the steamer and boat, the murmur and rhythm of oars, came to them out of the hot darkness; nights full of silver light and the wild melody of pealing bells and the mysterious ecstasy of love. It was over, but the stamp of it all on her brain was such that it could never be obliterated. Fate could hardly injure her. She had known the best in life.

She looked at him through her falling tears. "You are sorry, Roland?"

He came over to her.

"My sweet, I hate to part from you, but even if you were not obliged to return now, we should have to make some difference in our lives for a time. The strain of these past weeks with their constant anxiety has been tremendous."

She looked up at him quickly and saw indeed that new lines, new thinness, new dark shades were in that dear face, and felt suddenly within herself too that rest from this continued extreme of emotion would not be unwelcome.

"The end comes to all things," she said very sadly; "and to the greatest, fiercest, most intense things, the end comes the quickest."

"We must not call it the end, nor think of it like that," he answered gently. "Oh, after only a week's separation how I shall long to have you in my arms again. But now, dearest, we must part. It will be

best for us not to appear in London at the same time. I shall stay abroad a little while longer and come back only to get a rig-out for Egypt."

"Where will you go now?" she asked, her eyes clinging sadly to his face.

"I hardly know. I shall go to some quiet little place and rest and economise. I have been spending fifty pounds a week here, and though that is all right for a time, I could not keep it up."

Hilda bent her head down with a swift movement and kissed his hands.

"You have been so good to me! You have spent all that in amusing me!"

He smiled and kissed her bright sunny hair.

"My sweet, you must not talk of my being good to you! You know what I think of myself for what I have done, but if I have made you happy, sweetest, that is something."

She twined her arms closely round him. "Oh, so happy," she murmured, her lips on his ear, "as I think no one else could have done. Roland, shall we row together to the centre of the lake to-night and never return, as you said you would do if I left you? I am ready. Life can never have anything better for me than what it has here given me."

Roland did not answer for a moment; his eyes looked out on to the tranquil turquoise lake, and then back to the soft youthful figure, the fresh rounded face of the girl before him. For one reason



— that she might never belong to another — her idea attracted him; but only for a moment, the next he put it from him.

“No, we must not think of that, and why should we? Life may not have anything better, but it has as good. We will have Como again together.”

He kissed her with all the old fire and passion, and held her close to him, as if it would tear out his own heart to let her go; but all the same she knew instinctively that the sentence of banishment upon her was irrevocable; it was not in his power, any more than in hers, to avoid that.

The pressure of Time itself was upon them. Its great creaking wheel was heaving itself slowly round, and the moment had come when they must move from the angle beneath it where they had rested so happily through this one golden moon.

The season was over at Como; the hotels were closing. In another week the one they were in would be shuttered, shut and barred, and pass into its winter sleep beneath the mountain snows.

The same day they packed everything. Hilda moved about the beautiful bedroom — built over the very spot of Pliny's villa, from where his eyes, in those far-off Roman days, must often have watched the glories of the lake — with the tears falling fast. She could not help it; everything she touched brought back the keenest memories which plunged

into her like knives. Every dress she lifted to fold and pack had known his embrace, his admiration; every piece of jewellery, every necklet and bracelet had been clasped and unclasped by his warm strong fingers round her neck and arms. In every little action of her packing a thousand soft voices murmured to her of past joys.

She was to take the six o'clock express direct to London, that same train which he had asked her if she would go home by, five weeks back; and he would go with her as far as Milan, and there leave her to continue her journey alone to England.

In the dusk of the evening—for the air was no longer rose and gold as it had been at that hour when he came to fetch her—they left the hotel finally, and drove in a similar little victoria, past the margin of the lake, through the square to the station. Como was quiet now, settling down to her winter sleep; many of the shops were closing; no longer a crowd, but only a few scattered tourists were on the quay; the streets were empty, no band played in the square. Indefinably over all was written "The End."

Hilda was calm, but white as a statue as they entered the train and sat close, side by side, in their first-class carriage alone. Neither spoke one word until the lights of great Milan shone ahead of them. Then she turned and looked up at him, and saw

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his face was grey and lined with repressed pain. He looked down on her too and put his arm round her.

“My own, do you regret that you did not leave me five weeks ago?” he said.

Hilda put both her arms round his neck and pressed her white trembling lips on his as the train slowed down to a standstill at the station which was to part them.

“Roland,” she answered in a passionate whisper, “always remember, I regret *nothing*.”

## CHAPTER V

WHEN Hilda returned from Como she found her home in a state of excited preparation for her sister's wedding, and she was glad it was so, for it enabled her to escape a too close attention to herself and searching enquiries to which she hated to have to lie in answer. As it was, the family had all their thoughts turned in another direction. They were somewhat perturbed and anxious as the Hon. Bertie lately had seemed less devoted than formerly, and Rose, who personally and physically shrank from the union with sick loathing, and who therefore had been finding every excuse for delay, now that she saw danger of losing him altogether, was pressing on matters with the utmost speed. The marriage had been finally arranged for December, and both she and Mrs. Thorne were working indefatigably at the buying and making of the innumerable dresses and all else that Rose fancied she required.

So to her great relief Hilda was little questioned, and conversations about her doings at Como and Mrs. Howard's looks and sayings were generally interrupted by some pressing interrogation of Rose's as to shoes, hats or gloves, or time for appointments

with dressmakers, and Mrs. Thorne, somewhat worried and with her head full of these other all-important matters, was content to hear that Hilda had enjoyed herself immensely, that Mrs. Howard was charming, and did not have time or inclination to cross-examine her on her vague and general statements.

Hilda herself felt the need of rest. The intensity of her passion for Roland, the constant excitement in which she had lived while with him, the sorrow of the parting, had drawn so much on her nervous strength that she felt now she only wanted to sleep, to lie somewhere alone and be at peace. She pleaded that she had a cold, she thought it was influenza, and as neither Mrs. Thorne nor Rose wanted particularly just then to catch that malady, they readily accepted her idea that she should stay alone upstairs and have her meals sent up to her. So for a fortnight Hilda lay and dozed; she lay mostly actually in bed and slept, but sometimes she came to her chair by the window and sat there in a dressing-gown, thinking. She was not at all unhappy. Like most strong natures, if she were not with someone she really cared about, she preferred to be alone. To wish for companionship, for "someone to talk to," for idle chatter or babble, never occurred to her. The weak feminine longing to disclose her secret, to tell of her feelings or her acts, to talk about herself to some listening ear, never came near her for a

moment. She was supremely thankful to be alone, and lying sometimes on her bed in a perfect repose of wearied body and mind it came to her as to whether it would not be better to glide from this life altogether then, in those soft moments of reflection, cradled in happy memories. She did not suppose she could ever be as happy again as she had been at Como, certainly not more happy, and she wondered whether it were profitable to live on for the sake of the second best after having known the best.

Just a few drops more of the aconite she was supposed to be taking for her cold would transport her, surrounded by her rainbow-coloured dreams, across the shadowy Styx. But the thought of Roland held her back; he would certainly be grieved, and doubly so because he would suspect suicide, though no one else might. It would seem like a reproach to him; however she might write to him, whatever she might say, he would still fancy he was responsible for her death. She could never make it clear to him that she had floated away enwrapt in her glorious dreams and visions, grateful to him for having given her life's greatest happiness, content to have known the best.

So she dismissed all thoughts of death, and just lay there gathering strength again to go on with life. And need of strength indeed she found she had if she were to go on living. A fortnight after her return, one breezy October morning when the dead

leaves in the square garden were being whirled along in troops on their involuntary march, she opened her window and looked out on the world with a new joy in her eyes, the joy of a coming life. In Hilda nature was too strong for her not to be glad. Her only feeling when conviction was borne in upon her was of extreme delight; of a new interest, new zest in existence.

Roland's child, and she the mother! It was all pure rapture that she felt as she sat on the side of her bed, her arms crossed hard across her breast, as if she held the infant in a close embrace. A wild happiness enfolded her like a garment. Roland's child! A tiny little darling, image of himself! How wonderful it was! and how she would like to go away to some quiet corner of the earth and sit in a garden dreaming of its coming, and when it came what a delight to rear and educate and train it, just as she had watched the mother birds train their young! She felt all that keen, unspoiled pleasure that nature ordained that woman should have in such circumstances, but which our artificial civilisation denies them. How few women now in our state of society, burdened by their artificial clothes, occupied by their artificial duties, weakened in body by their artificial habits, can feel as Hilda felt, thinking of their coming child!

The only shadow that fell across her brain was how would Roland accept it! It was absolutely use-

less to think of confiding her news to anyone but him. To her ideas it concerned only herself and him. She would disappear from this existence which wearied her so much, and go under his directions to some little place near him, where he could visit her at his pleasure, and where she could await in single-hearted joy the all-absorbing event.

Roland was away now, and she was not sure when he meant to come back. But his return would probably be soon, as in November he had to leave for Egypt, and he had said he must be in London for a time before then. She wrote at once to him to beg him to come to her immediately on his return, whenever that might be, and dressed and went to the post with the letter herself, rejoicing in her refound strength and vigour.

If only he were pleased about it she was content. If only he would let her separate herself from her people, and live her own life by herself; but a little apprehension mixed itself with her thoughts, as the chill wind of evening mixes itself sometimes with the glamour of sunset, because she was not sure what Roland would say.

That evening she joined her family at dinner, and full of an inward joy and absorbed in the flashing light of her own thoughts, she heard as in a dream the eager discussion between her mother and Rose that went on all dinner.

"I think *two* yards of lace would do, don't you?



Brussels is so very expensive?" "Yes; tucked up on the right side; my dear child, you *never* do it on the left." "Oh, certainly gold shoes to match, and stockings too — or wait, *grey* stockings and gilt shoes — perhaps?" and similar sentences kept driving through her ears, breaking in on her visions of Como lake and its sleeping mountains, of Roland's face, and the future of her child.

## CHAPTER VI

WITHIN Hilda's bedroom the electric lights were all fully turned on, and under the centre ones she stood examining the contents of a little jeweller's case. She was dressed in her prettiest white silk evening gown, the waving glossy masses of her hair beautifully done and intertwined with pearls. It was the evening of a dance at Mrs. Thorne's house, one of those small dances in a small house that are voted such a success simply because apparently so many more are invited and attend than there is room for, so that no one can dance with comfort, or get up the stairs in safety; because some people put on very fine dresses, and others stand about consumed with envy, staring at them. It was just before the supper hour, and Hilda, who had been dancing whenever that was not impossible owing to the crush, with a strange weight on her heart, had slipped away at last to the shelter of her own room. All the joyous vitality of a few weeks back had been crushed out of her; all her happiness had fled; her face looked pale now, her eyes dark with pain. Her glad secret was hers alone no longer. Mrs. Thorne knew it, and all the daughter's happiness was at an end. It is al-

ways so when the fat paw of our ugly civilisation comes down on the pure, simple pleasures of life and crushes them out, leaving shame and defilement where they have been.

One morning recently Hilda had fainted, and Mrs. Thorne, hurriedly summoned to her and remaining afterwards talking with her, had suddenly seemed to come out of her surrounding fog of trousseaux items, dressmakers, and bills. A light had seemed suddenly to break in upon her, and when she closely questioned her, Hilda did not think it was of any avail to deny the facts, which her mother must know very soon if the plan of going away from her home was to be carried out. The name of Roland was hardly mentioned. All the past meetings of the two, every trifle that at the time had seemed of no importance, now took on its real colour, and almost without Hilda having to speak Mrs. Thorne saw it all. As when one stands outside a locked door, one sees nothing beyond, but when the key is put into one's hand the door is opened and the whole room to its smallest detail revealed. To Hilda's immense surprise Mrs. Thorne's attitude seemed one of sheer terror; her anger appeared to be swallowed up in fear. She said nothing touching on the morality or otherwise of Hilda's act; hardly seemed to wish to waste breath in reproaching her. Simply overwhelming horror and apprehension seemed to paralyse her.

Hilda gazed at her mother in unfeigned wonderment. Had she confessed to committing a murder and told her the law already claimed her, she would have expected something like this, and in that case Mrs. Thorne could not have looked more fear-stricken. To all Hilda's pleadings, at first joyful if somewhat anxious, she would not listen for a moment. Each was virtually talking in a language the other did not understand, but Mrs. Thorne confined herself chiefly to the efforts to instil into Hilda the same panic she felt herself, and to pointing out to her there was only one way to save her soul, and, what seemed far more important, her reputation, and that was by marrying some man who was not the father of her child. Any man would do, but she must marry, marry, marry someone at once, before a breath could be whispered against her, before her sister Rose was married even. Roland she must shun, she must not seek to see him, to hear from him. And at last, utterly bewildered and in floods of tears, with all the bright, burning, natural joy of maternity knocked out of her, beaten and bruised with words, but protesting still that she could say nothing, promise nothing, till she had heard what Roland wished, Hilda had been left alone.

For many days now she had been sunk in a chill gloom. She had had no answer yet to her letter, but Mrs. Thorne had told her that Roland could only be angered and intensely annoyed at her news, and that

the one thing now that would please him would be to hear she was engaged to somebody else.

There was a man now who loved Hilda, she argued; Sir James Wilton, a retired Indian Commissioner. Why would she not accept him at once and spare Roland and her family all the pain and anxiety her folly would plunge them into? It was quite true that she had hoped Hilda might marry very well indeed; her difference from the ordinary run of girls, combined with her good looks, might have led to any — even the most brilliant match, but it was no use thinking of that now; delay would be impossible. She had ruined herself utterly, shattered and destroyed all her mother's hopes, blasted her own life and future, and the best thing to do would be to accept the highest offer of those immediately available. So Mrs. Thorne had talked day by day in the language of the world to Hilda's weary ears, and she stood now looking at the bracelet in her hand, a gift from Sir James, with languid interest.

"I can't take it and I certainly don't want it," she thought. "One kiss from Roland is more to me than all the jewels in the world. Oh, why am I so unhappy? Do I deserve it? Was it a crime to love a man so lonely, so wretched, so alone as he was? I was injuring no one. No, it was not a crime, not a sin, but perhaps it was a mistake, and for our mistakes we are punished in this world far more heavily than for our sins or crimes. And yet what-

ever I have to pay now, do I regret it? No, *no, no*. How happy I have been! What joyous hours we have had! No one can take those away from me. Not Jove himself can take away what the flying hour has once carried off."

She sat down on the sofa still holding the bracelet mechanically in her hand, but not looking at it. Her eyes were suffused now suddenly with warm tears in which she saw the glittering memory of Como.

"Roland," she murmured very softly, "I am content to suffer anything, everything, while you are still in the world, and I may know your kiss and have your arms round me just for one moment in months or years of pain."

She sat there lost in thought, and did not hear the door open nor anyone enter. Rose, a wonderful vision of shimmering silk and lace, came into the room.

"Hilda," she said in a sharp vexed tone, "why don't you come down again? They are all asking for you, and mamma is getting so cross."

"I don't want to come down again. I don't want to dance. Say I'm ill, say anything you like, only leave me in peace."

"But Sir James is there. He says you promised him some dances," continued Rose, sitting down on the sofa by her. "Hilda, you will accept him, won't you, if he proposes? I think he is going to to-night."

Do! If what mamma says is really true, it would all be so dreadful if you don't marry someone, and Roland *can't* marry you; so you *must* find someone else. Hilda, don't look so strangely at me!"

"What has mamma said to you?"

"Well . . . you know . . . But it is not so bad for you as it might be for some girls. You have such heaps of offers. You've only got to accept somebody and it will be all right. Only perhaps Sir James has the most money. Do take him."

Hilda drew a little further away on the sofa from her sister, who had pressed eagerly up to her.

"Accept Sir James, and deceive him? Tell him nothing, you mean?"

"Oh, *yes*, of course. Hilda, you must not dream of telling anything. That would be dreadful."

"The deception of an innocent person who loves and trusts me seems much more dreadful. No, I love Roland, and I shall keep to him whatever happens."

"But Roland can't marry you," exclaimed Rose excitedly. "He can't do anything. You will be disgraced before the whole world."

"I don't care about the world."

"But *I* care," Rose answered, still more excitedly. "I am your sister, and if you are disgraced *I* am. You know I am engaged to Bertie. He will not marry me if you make a scandal in the family. No one cares *what* you do in this world, only you must

keep it secret. You talk of deception. Why, that is the one law the whole of Society is trying to uphold! You must marry somebody. You shan't spoil the whole of my life as well as your own!"

Before Hilda had time to answer Mrs. Thorne came into the room, and Rose jumped up from the sofa and ran towards her.

"Mamma, do come and talk to Hilda. She won't come back to the dance, she won't listen to anything I say. She says she won't marry anybody! Tell her she must! It's her duty to us to make things seem all right."

Mrs. Thorne came over to Hilda and sat down on the sofa by her.

"Dear child, what have you got there? — another present? Who is it from?"

"It's from Sir James," answered Hilda dully.

Mrs. Thorne took the bracelet and looked at it. "What a lovely thing! How generous he is!" Then she added softly, "Dear, it would make me so happy, relieve my anxiety so much, if you would just clasp this on your arm and go down and accept him. He is a good man, an honourable man, and he has such a splendid position to offer you."

"But I don't love him. It would be abominably unfair to accept him when I love Roland and am going to be the mother of his child."

Mrs. Thorne started and looked round apprehen-



sively. "Oh, hush, Hilda, pray don't say such things. Let us forget that. Dismiss it from your mind. You are mistaken, dear girl; just run away now to Sir James, and dance with him and say 'yes' if he asks you."

"If I am mistaken there's no need for me to marry at all. I want to live with Roland and make him happy and be happy myself. Men and women were intended for that; they were never intended to entrap and marry people they don't love, to lie and deceive and be tortured and worried, to satisfy a convention. Let me go away where you will never see me and live at peace as I like."

"But how can you go away without making a scandal, and, as Rose says, breaking off her engagement and spoiling her life? Really, you are very selfish."

Hilda dropped her head in her hands. "Am I?" She suddenly rose and stood facing her mother in the centre of the room. "Am I selfish because I won't sacrifice my conscience, my honour, my love to my sister? Am I bound to do that? How far do the rights of others go? Have I none of my own? And you ask me to sacrifice another too. You say Sir James is good and honourable. Why should I burden him with a wife who cannot love him, who belongs to another? I can't do it. Do go away, mamma, and take Rose with you. There must be some other way better than this of meeting the

future. Perhaps my death would be the simplest way out."

Mrs. Thorne looked horrified. "Suicide! Oh, Hilda, never think of that! That would make the worst scandal of all."

"Otherwise it would not matter," Hilda answered bitterly.

"Don't be foolish. Of course it would matter. You know we are all very fond of you. But I mean death does not help to conceal anything. It makes everything terribly public."

"Well, I will think what I can do. Please do not stay and keep Rose away from her dance. There is the bracelet; I can't take it. Will you give it back to Sir James and say I'm not well enough to see him?"

"Hilda darling," said Mrs. Thorne persuasively, "think it all over and consider everything, and remember how very happy it would make me to see you suitably married. It would make everything right, as no one then need ever know anything."

Hilda turned away from her mother with a gesture of despair, tinged with scorn, but Mrs. Thorne continued in an even tone:

"If Sir James suspects the truth it will be too late for him to do anything after you are married. No one can take your position as his wife away from you. You realise all the advantages, don't you, dear?"

"Yes . . . and all the horror and wrongness of it too."

"I think you might consider the horror and wrongness of your conduct with Roland, and try and make what reparation you can to your family now," Mrs. Thorne answered sharply. "Come, Rose." Rose, who had been standing by a small table, fingering the flowers on it and looking at her sister, joined her mother, and they both went out.

"I shan't return the bracelet just yet," remarked Mrs. Thorne as they passed through the door.

Hilda, left to herself, sat down on the sofa and closed her eyes. "Oh, how the horror of it all oppresses me," she murmured to herself. "The wrongness of my conduct with Roland! Was it so wrong? Was he to remain all his life alone because his wife was mad? And I, why should I not have the man I love? Whom have I sinned against? The world? But what is the world to me? I want nothing of it. I do not want anything it can give. I only want to live my life with him. There would be no wrongness now if I could just go quietly away with him."

She lapsed into silence, and drew out her watch and looked at it. "Nearly one." There was a light knock on the door.

"Come in," returned Hilda in a toneless voice. The door was gently opened, and as she looked up wondering who was coming in with such caution,

she started suddenly to her feet with a cry of joy. It was Roland. Not since Como had she seen that dear face and form, and she ran to him and was clasped in his arms again, losing suddenly all sense of pain and distress, feeling every sensation sink away from her till only pure joy was left.

"Roland! It is such a delight to see you, even though I have such bad news for you. You had my letter asking you to come? I thought I had better tell you, not write it."

He looked down on her and she saw suddenly his face grow grave. He released her, but still kept one arm round her waist. "What is your news, darling, tell me?"

She turned to him and whispered a few words in his ear. Roland drew away from her and sat down by one of the little tables with his arms outstretched upon it. He said nothing, only let his eyes, full of distress, travel over her.

"It ought to be such good news," Hilda said, standing by him and playing with his hair. "Such a joy to us, Roland; why not let it be? Let us go away together. We need not even live together. Let me stay somewhere quite near you, in some little cottage or hut or room, somewhere where you could come to see me. There I will be content to live quietly by myself, thinking of you, and when it comes I would be so glad to bring it up, educate it, just devote myself to it and you. A hut with a

little garden, and just Roland . . . and myself . . . and it." There was silence in the room, then Hilda added very softly, "Roland, can't we do that?"

"No, Hilda, no, no, a thousand times no," answered Roland desperately. "Take you away and bury you somewhere in the wilds, disgraced for all the rest of your life! A girl of your rank, your beauty, your gifts! Take you away from the brilliant life you are accustomed to, and give you what in exchange?"

Hilda fell on her knees before him, and, putting her hands on his knees, looked up to him. "All I want — yourself."

Roland stroked her hair tenderly. "My darling, I cannot value myself at the price of all those things."

"Surely it is for me to do the valuation."

"No, because you don't understand; you don't see the future as I do. Just now perhaps for a time I could be everything to you, but afterwards you might regret it, you might long for all you would now give up, and I should have no power to give it back to you. So far we may have done wrong, but you have not suffered, and you *must* not suffer through me. Somehow we must keep your social position."

"How I hate those words! They murder everything! Truth, honour, joy, they all have to be sacrificed to one's social position. What has it ever

done for me? I came out and went to some tedious dances, some still more boring dinners. I met a lot of stupid people, all with social positions. I was bored and wearied to death until — until I met Roland. All the joy I have ever known has been found in your kiss!”

Roland bent over and kissed her, folding his arms closely round her.

“Society and the world does not give us happiness. That is found in nature and love,” Hilda continued softly. “That is why I want to get away to them. A little cottage, and you and me and it, and happiness. Can’t we have that?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I have told you.”

“Then what are we to do?”

“My regiment is ordered to Egypt for the winter. I must go with it. You must stay here and keep your place in the world. You must marry.”

Hilda sprang to her feet. She was white with horrible pain and fear now. Her mother had been right, then. Roland thought as they thought.

“Roland! Mamma and Rose have been urging that upon me already and I refused. I never could have believed you would urge it. Oh, this is the worst.”

Roland started up and followed her. “Don’t you know that it is agony to me to propose such

a thing?" he declared passionately. "Can't you feel what it is for a man of my nature to even utter the words to a woman I love as I love you? It is for *you*, Hilda, for *you*, that you may be safe, protected. How else can you be? We are in this mad world which would throw me into prison if *I* married you, which would throw you into outer darkness, branded and disgraced, if you were to own your love for me. What can we do? After your wedding I shall feel like blowing out my brains, but I must not do it for your sake. I must live somehow and see it through."

Hilda turned and faced him. She was very serious. "Roland, it is a mistake. A woman's instinct is far truer than a man's. Mine tells me this is all wrong. Whatever difficulties we are in at present, nothing could be so bad as this raising of a wall between us."

Roland very gently took her hand and pressed it to his breast. "Your marriage shall never be a wall between us. Do you think I would ever give you up wholly to another man? No, you have been mine, and you are, and shall remain so. When I come back from Egypt I will come and see you, and then . . ." He bent forward to kiss her, but she turned gently away.

"A dark life of lies and deception," she answered, sighing.

"Why not? It's the way of the world. We are all brought up to it," said Roland gloomily, letting

go her hand and throwing himself into a chair.

Hilda came up and knelt before him, stretching out her arms passionately. "Roland! don't ask me to do this horrible thing, to give myself to another man, to deceive him, to be unfaithful to you, to violate every feeling, every principle I have, to outrage my conscience. If I do, our love can never be again the free innocent joyous thing it has been. Let me suffer, I am willing to; let me lose the respect of the world, what does that matter if I keep my own? If you love me you will not ask me to give up that."

Roland leant forward and pressed his hands with equal passion upon her shoulders. "It is because I love you I ask you. No, not ask, command you to. Hilda, you must do it. You have always obeyed me in everything. You have got to do so now. I am your conscience, your will, your everything. I am double your age, and I know the world. I know men and women, and the birth and death of their passions. What is everything to us to-day may be nothing to us to-morrow, and if you sell all that you have for passion to-day and it deserts you to-morrow, you long for those things back which you have given up. My sweet, my darling, my own," he added, catching her to him in a passion of tenderness, and holding her to his breast, "be guided by me, do not think for yourself, there is just this one way to save you. Take it for my sake. I must leave



you now, every moment I stay is dangerous. I could only slip up to you because they were all at supper, and James passed me through."

Hilda lay half stupefied in his embrace, only at the idea of parting she twined her arms round him.

"Let me go, dearest." She slowly released him and sank into a kneeling position by the table, on which she laid her head and arms.

Roland bent over her. "Come to me to-morrow afternoon to my chambers; we are safer there than here. Good night, my own."

"Roland!"

Roland hesitated by the door. "I hear steps coming. To-morrow, Hilda, remember."

Hilda lifted her eyes and watched him go. Then slowly she let her head sink down again on her outstretched arms.

"Deserted even by him," she thought, in a mist of frightful pain, "but all the same, I will live and do what is best for *It*."

## CHAPTER VII

THE following afternoon towards three o'clock Roland was sitting alone in his rooms, sunk in the deepest melancholy. Looking at him now as he sat in one of his great arm-chairs, one would hardly have recognised him as the same man who had stood full of life and fire before Hilda in the little salon at Como. His face looked grey and cold, the cheeks seemed to have fallen in, haggard lines showed themselves round the dull and bloodshot eyes.

All the previous night, unable to sleep, to banish from him for a moment his remorseless thoughts, he had tossed about in his bed, suffering mentally as a poor wretch might suffer physically stretched upon a rack. Hilda to be the wife of another! This was the idea that gave him such agony. And yet it had been his own; from the first indefinitely he had thought this must be the end, but he had never then realised what his love and passion for Hilda would become. Intimacy, the usual cure for passion, with *her* had led merely to stronger, deeper feeling; the tie, instead of being weakened, had been woven infinitely stronger by their life together, and now the way in which she regarded its result, not in the

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worldly light of a tiresome penalty, but as a crowning joy, seemed to draw her extraordinarily close to him. Though in that last interview he might have seemed cold, unmoved, in reality she was penetrating deeply into his inmost heart.

A man of the world himself, brought up in it, soaked through with its atmosphere, surrounded always by entirely worldly people, it was just this purely unworldly character of Hilda's that so attracted him. She was the natural woman, clever, loving, submissive, devoted, willing to suffer anything at the hands of, or for the sake of, the man she had chosen. Just the natural lovely female companion for man as nature intended her to be, and as she was before civilisation caught her and cramped her waist in stays, her feet in high-heeled boots, her mind with convention, and her soul with lies.

Of every subject, of everything in life, Hilda took the purely natural view, and it seemed impossible to her to take any other; and while with her he breathed another atmosphere, entered with her into quite another world. She had loved him with a glad spontaneous devoted passion, and for himself alone, and had given herself to him undeterred by the frightful sacrifice of herself that she had made. And now in the same way she loved the child and rejoiced in its coming, in the face of everything, because it was *his* child and the result of his love.

There was a subtle flattery to his vanity in her attitude, a certain irresistible charm which Roland could hardly define to himself, but which seemed to draw him to her and bind them close round to each other as if with the strongest steel cables, strongly though his reason pointed out the folly of her views. In all men, deep within them, is a leaning to the natural, and perhaps the women of the world who make light of love and talk of it as a pastime, and of maternity as a bore, and who show their intense chagrin if they find their love bearing fruit, do not realise how much they offend this inner sense in men. The men themselves do not understand why such women become wearisome and unsympathetic to them; they simply wander away from them, seeking instinctively to get back nearer to nature.

Hilda might be unpractical and foolish, Roland might think so and tell her so, but all the same he had to go on loving her.

As he sat now, the vision her words had called up floated before him in a rainbow cloud. 'A secluded life with her, so clever, so brilliant, so many-sided, so lovely, with the gleaming lights in her hair and eyes, with that eternal freshness of thought, and all that spontaneous passion for himself, surely that would be worth living? Better worth perhaps than any other. He closed his eyes and thought of it, and the fascination of the woman grew upon him

till he almost started up to find pen and ink and write to her that he consented.

But then came the memory of his regiment, his life-work; it would probably have to be given up, and the condemnation of the world would have to be faced. Nor was Roland entirely selfish in his thoughts; if he could have been quite certain that Hilda herself would never regret all that she would have to give up, he might have yielded to her view. But his mind was so influenced and swayed by the memory of all the women he had ever seen and known, who in various ways desired and sought after worldly pleasures, that he could hardly imagine one who could live contentedly in permanent isolation. He started to his feet, as if to chase from him the tempting pictures Fancy held before him.

"No, it *is* no use," he muttered to himself. "We must go on with this plan of her marrying someone, I suppose, but I never thought it would be so bad; I never thought I should get to love her so much." He went to the table and picked up mechanically the telegram that lay there and read it through again.

"Coming to see you this afternoon. Am up on business with Clive.—HARRINGTON."

Then he laid it down and began to pace the room from end to end, trying to see a way out of his net-like trouble, poor prisoner of convention. Perhaps

an hour passed while in deadly misery he walked up and down the long and handsome room, struggling with himself to fight down all his natural impulses, to be true to his conventional, world-trained self. Then as the dreary dusk closed in the door opened, and Doctor Harrington, cheery and unannounced, came in.

"Oh, there you are, Alan," Roland said; "I'm always glad to see you. Sit down. Where's your friend Talbot? I thought you said he was coming with you."

"He's here. I left him down in the hall. I didn't know if you'd want to be bothered with him. He's all right. He's got a book with him. I've set him to reading Homer; he's doing it. He's awfully quick, you know. For all intellectual things his brain's astonishingly 'cute. You look frightfully pulled down. What's specially the matter now?"

"The matter, the matter, what isn't the matter? Alan, I told you a little while ago, didn't I, that I loved a woman who is not the one at Longhurst. Well, last evening I had to tell her to marry another man to save her position. Now you know why I look as I do."

"Hm . . . wanting to marry her yourself?"

"Yes, wanting it as a man dying of thirst in the desert wants to drink," returned Roland bitterly.

"Her marriage to someone is a necessity?"

"Yes, for her reputation."

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"Other women have been in difficulties and got out of them without marriage!"

"Perhaps, but Hilda would never consent to anything that would harm her child. She is so different from most women. She considers her conscience, her principles, what she believes to be right, before everything."

The doctor looked up with interest. "What a strange thing! and you say she is in Society?"

"Yes."

"Well, can't she go away for a time? A little trip abroad, eh! travel for a few months?"

"How can she go? I can't take her. If she went alone there would sure to be talk. Her mother cannot go with her just now, as the sister is going to be married. Besides, I am afraid we have got to part in any case. Our names are getting coupled together; unless something is done she will lose her place in the world."

There was a pause for a moment in which the two men looked at each other. Then the doctor said very quietly:

"There is an easy way out of it, Roland, but you won't take it, I expect, if I show it to you."

"What is it?" Roland bent forward eagerly.

The doctor wheeled his chair close to him, and speaking in a low tone said:

"Tell that boy, Clive Talbot, that when he returns to Longhurst he is to strangle Mrs. West."

"Alan! what are you talking about? You're as mad as your patients," Roland answered sternly.

"I told you you would not do it," returned the doctor sulkily. "Don't look at me like that. You said you were so desperately anxious to marry your girl, and I showed you there was just one way, but I don't want you to take it. It would make no end of a scandal and bother for me, and I should be censured for negligence. Still, I'd stand all that at a pinch for the sake of our friendship, and because these poor demented lives don't seem to me to be of much account; but it's only for your sake. It's no business of mine."

"I could never do it," answered Roland decidedly. "I would never injure Lilian. To me a thing one has once loved is sacred for ever; I could never harm it."

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. "Not even to marry . . . Hilda?"

"No, not even for that."

"Well, don't think I shall ask Talbot for you. I am not going to run the risk of instigating a murder. To me both you and Hilda seem a couple of quixotic idiots, and without any twinge of conscience I will certify you both as imbeciles, take you into Longhurst, and give you married quarters. Will that do?"

Roland rose impatiently. "I can't think how you can joke about it," he said.



"I am not really joking; you know my way," returned the doctor, growing serious. "I can't help seeing the queer side of things; people all seem a little mad to me. But look here; I really have a suggestion which is worth listening to. What is it you feel so much in this marriage idea? Jealousy of the man, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, the giving her up," Roland groaned.

"If it were a mere nominal tie, a formal thing and no more; if the husband had no rights, if the woman were to remain yours just the same as before, that would be all right, wouldn't it?"

"It would be better . . . yes, it would be possible then."

"Well, with your consent I will introduce Talbot to your girl and tell him to marry her. He will do it, but he won't know what he is doing. He does not know what marriage means. He will go through the ceremony quite naturally, but unless his wife suggests its significance she will be quite safe from him."

Roland listened intently to this speech, then covered his eyes with his hand. "Hilda married to a madman!"

"Clive isn't that," said the doctor testily. "There are heaps of people in your set now a lot madder than he is. I should call him sane with a weak critical faculty. With a good woman he would be perfectly safe and harmless. All her suggestions

to him would be good and he would follow them. Of course, if he were to be in bad or indifferent hands I could not free him."

"Hilda is goodness itself."

"So I have already gathered," remarked the doctor sarcastically. "Hence my suggestion. It does not appeal to you?"

"I hardly know," returned Roland wretchedly.

"You need feel no jealousy then. The girl's name and position are secure. Clive is of good family. He has nothing of his own at present, but when he is twenty-five he comes into considerable property. Your relations with her need not be altered; Clive would not understand them, and so would not resent them. In short," he added cynically, "he seems exactly the sort of bridegroom you are looking for."

There was a long pause. Roland sat at the table with his face covered. Suddenly he raised his head. "That is Hilda, I know her step! She was coming to see me this afternoon."

"By arrangement?" asked the doctor smoothly.

"Yes."

The doctor lifted his eyebrows. "No wonder people are talking. Well, what do you want me to do? Bow myself out, stay here, climb into a cupboard, or what?"

"No, no, stay where you are," Roland answered, and went to the door as Hilda came in.

She was very handsomely dressed in dark blue velvet, and Roland's heart beat hard as he saw her. She started slightly on seeing the doctor, then smiled and bowed. Roland drew her into the room.

"Hilda, this is Doctor Harrington. He is, as you know, my friend. I trust him and he knows our difficulties. He is anxious to help us. We were just talking of you when you came in."

Hilda smiled and shook hands with the doctor, then took the seat Roland put for her a little distance away from the doctor, who remained near the table.

"Talking of me?" She had her hands in her muff on her lap. She looked up at Roland with passionate affection.

"Yes, my darling, of you, and he has suggested a plan which I think will save our being separated, if you will consent to it."

"Avoid separation?" she said eagerly. "Yes, Roland, what is it?"

"He has amongst his patients a young man who would marry you and give you his name and formal position of his wife, but would ask nothing further from you. Hilda, will you consent to this, and remain mine in reality still?" He bent forward to her and rested his hands on her muff.

"Among his patients?" she exclaimed, shrinking back. "Then he is mad! Oh, I can't do it. I can't marry anyone." She got up and moved away,

from him. "I came to tell you now that I have made up my mind I would not, that I would go away by myself with a little money I have of my own, and find a quiet place to stay . . . in Egypt . . . as you are going there. There I will live. I shall be free, independent, and just sometimes, as seldom as you wish, you shall come to see me. I am sure that would do."

Roland smiled very sadly. "No, it would not. Not for a single month. You don't know Egypt. Come here, come and sit on my knee, come!"

Hilda hesitated and looked at the doctor, who was sitting by the table, apparently absorbed in the paper.

"Never mind the doctor," said Roland impatiently, "come here."

Hilda moved slowly over to him. He took her on to his knee and put his arms round her. "Listen to me; it seems as if this idea of the doctor's would really help us. This young Talbot is only like a boy, marriage with him means nothing but just going through the ceremony; but it does give you safety, and it gives a name and parentage to the child. If you persist in remaining unmarried, think what an injustice you do to it. It will come into the world with a handicap which can never be lifted. If I become free at any time, if we marry afterwards, that does not help matters."

Hilda drew herself up proudly. "As you say, it

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might be a handicap, but my child will be strong enough and gifted enough I know to win the race of life even if he is handicapped."

"It is useless to argue about it," said Roland, constrainedly putting her from him and rising. "Either you obey me and secure your own position, or there is the end of everything between us. As a married woman you can receive me at your home. We can live as we have done; as a single girl you cannot. If you ask me, I must decline to come. You can keep your freedom, but you will drive me away from you."

"Roland, that could not be!"

"You will find it so."

"Of course, I must do as you wish," Hilda said in a tone of despair, "rather than lose you, but you are cruel, you are mistaken, you will regret it. It is wrong, a profanation of marriage and of love; it is folly, madness."

Roland came up and clasped her in his arms. "My sweet, my own, all that I do and say is only for your sake. I believe I am acting for the best. Some day you will see it so."

He kissed her passionately, and suddenly released her as the door opened and Clive Talbot entered. The doctor rose and faced him. He did not see Hilda for a moment.

"Well, you were such a jolly long time up here," he said, "I came to see after you. What on

earth . . ." then, as he caught sight of Hilda . . .  
 "Oh, I beg pardon. I did not know a lady was here."

"It's all right; come in, Clive. You know Colonel West. This is Miss Thorne. Mr. Talbot."

Hilda bowed and sat down on a chair in silence, looking straight before her. Clive looked at her with the greatest admiration. His eyes seemed to rest on her with a sort of ecstatic delight.

"Have you had a good read?" asked the doctor.

"Yes, I've done a lot, but it's rather chilly in that hall. Do you know it's past four? we shan't get our usual train back."

"It doesn't matter about the train, Clive. I have something important for you to do. Will you do it for me?"

"Of course I will, doctor. What is it?" he answered readily.

"I want you to propose to that lady who is sitting there — Miss Thorne."

Clive looked surprised, and hesitated. "Propose to her? Seems jolly conceited though, doesn't it?"

"Never mind what it seems, it's all right. Just be a good boy, as you always are."

Clive looked with consternation at Hilda, who was seated unmoved, looking away. "But what shall I say?"

"Just say, 'Miss Thorne, will you do me the honour of accepting my hand?'" said the doctor.

"All right, but she's sure to say no." He rose and approached Hilda and said gently, "Miss Thorne, the doctor says I am to propose to you. It seems thundering cheek, and I expect it's some joke of his."

There was a pause of dead silence in the room. Hilda did not move. Clive's manner was quite natural, and he gazed on her with genuine admiration and delight.

"Come, Clive, that's not right; just say what I told you," said the doctor, coming up.

"Will you do me the honour of accepting my hand?" Clive said quietly.

"Roland!" exclaimed Hilda, in an agonised tone.

Roland came up behind her and looked over her shoulder at Clive.

"Miss Thorne accepts you," he said in a strange voice that Hilda hardly recognised.

To say those words cost him more than she herself could realise. He was suffering acutely, and in suffering as keen as his the mind has not its best powers of judgment; a man acts quickly, rashly, blindly, just as in great physical pain he struggles desperately, wildly, and often to his own detriment.

To Roland it was the height of misery to give Hilda to any man, but the previous night his jealousy had so torn him with visions of another claiming her, loving her, demanding her love in return, that to

give her to Clive, who would claim and demand nothing, seemed for the moment an infinite relief.

It would be no marriage really; this boy would be nothing to her, and when Roland had to leave her it would be not to another's love and wifely duties, but to thinking and dreaming of him, to waiting and longing for his return. Surely, as the doctor said, he could not hope for any better fortune than this. If her marriage were a necessity, and it seemed it was, then her acceptance of Clive was the very best which could happen.

The doctor's suggestion, his and Clive's visit, had come at a moment when Roland was in a crisis of intense agony, and he grasped eagerly at the relief from that frightful gnawing jealousy which Clive's boyish ignorance held out to him, as a man in dire bodily pain snatches at the anodyne bottle.

Hilda at his words gazed up at Clive, who was standing before her, and met his admiring, affectionate gaze upon her. Her eyes rested on him, content, as they always felt at the sight of any beautiful thing. Her quick perception took in at once the absence of passion, absence of an understanding of the situation, in those fine dark eyes looking so gently at her, and it came to her also as a relief that she would not be called upon here to give more than she honourably could, that this man would never seek to take Roland's place. Moreover, she would have no need to deceive, to profess to feel anything more



than a sisterly tenderness, which would not be difficult towards a graceful, youthful, gentle-eyed creature like this.

Clive looked at Roland curiously as he spoke for Hilda, and answered:

"She didn't say it herself, though."

"Hilda, do as I tell you," Roland said coldly.

Hilda rose suddenly and held out her hand to Clive. "I accept you, Mr. Talbot," she said in a low tone.

Clive looked delighted. "I say, do you really? It's stunning of you! How jolly! Are you coming down to Longhurst with us?"

"I feel as if I were fit to," she answered distractedly.

"Oh, but you needn't mind. It's such a nice place, and everyone gets better there. If you come I'll teach you to scull, and we can go for walks together. Do come."

He still held her hand and looked at her with admiring affection. Roland, who had been sullenly looking on very blackly, now suddenly came up and intervened. He broke their hands apart.

"The doctor is waiting for you, I think, Mr. Talbot. This lady is my guest for this evening."

Clive immediately dropped her hand, but continued to look at her. "I hope we shall meet again very soon. I wish you would visit Longhurst."

"Good-bye," Hilda said very sadly.

"Run down and get a taxi, Clive, and sit in it till I come," the doctor said. "I have some business with Colonel West. Roland, can I see you alone for a few minutes? You see, if this business is to be carried through, there's a good deal to consider and arrange, and I should like to show you Clive's financial position. I am one of the trustees of the property. Then you can put the whole thing before the girl's mother."

"Certainly, you can come in here." He opened the door into an adjoining room. "Go in; I'll be with you in a moment."

The doctor passed through the door, and Roland came back to Hilda, who sat with her head bowed, in an attitude of utter despair.

"Hilda, my darling, do try to take a reasonable views of things. Is not a marriage like this better than one to a man who would claim you as his wife, a man who would perhaps take you from me and separate us utterly?"

"Perhaps it is, if all turns out exactly as you plan it. But all marriage is launching a boat upon an uncertain sea. Clive Talbot is not as mad as you think. He is young, he may recover."

"The doctor says not."

"Doctors are constantly wrong."

As if he had heard this heresy, the doctor stamped across the inner room and called: "Are you coming, Roland?"

Roland hurriedly pressed a kiss on her hair and turned to the door. "Yes, I am coming."

Hilda sat up and stretched out her arms towards the empty air. "Oh, why will they go down into all these dark and devious little paths of trickery and deception? Why cannot men follow the light of Truth and Nature; own to whatever deeds they have done, and accept Nature's punishment for them, and go on openly, fearlessly to the end? I wonder if it would be better if I ran away from them all and hid myself somewhere, and wrote from abroad to my people. Would that injure Rose? Would it stop her marriage?" She rose and stood debating with herself. "Roland says he would not come to me if I remain unmarried, but he would. Of course he would come, secretly if not openly, if I wrote to him I wanted him, and I was alone and free. Shall I disappear now this evening from them all, or would they follow me, find me?"

She fastened her gloves and stepped forward to the door. As she did so the doctor came back from the other room, and so was between her and the outer door.

"Roland was telling me what you fear in this marriage is your husband's possible recovery. Is that so?"

Hilda drew herself up and faced the doctor. "I did not say I feared it; I said it was possible."

The doctor smiled. "I think I can guard against

that for you. Here is a little bottle you can take as a wedding present from me. Should your husband at any time show signs of recovery which might alarm you, a few drops of this daily in his tea or coffee would soon put him back to his present state of happy boyhood!"

Hilda watched the doctor with growing disgust, and drew back as he offered her a little bottle.

"Isn't it enough that you have concocted this scheme?" she said in a low voice. "Do you want now to offer me drugs to drive a fellow creature back into the darkness of madness when he had struggled out of it? Is this how you care for the lives entrusted to you? Keep your bottle for your patients at Longhurst! Don't offer it to me! I would not use it if it were to save my life."

The doctor looked at her with indulgent sarcasm. "A great deal of fuss about nothing! I know you are a quixotic sort of young woman. However, Clive's a good-looking fellow. Perhaps you have no objection to his waking up to a sense of his rights?"

Hilda did not answer at all; only drew further away from him.

"From my point of view I think it's a kindness to Clive to preserve his present happy irresponsible position!"

"One can only treat people as one would wish to be treated oneself. If I were returning to my reason

I would not wish anyone to extinguish its dawning light," returned Hilda coldly.

"Quite so, quite so; very nicely put! 'And now take the bottle, and remember three to four drops in tea or coffee.'" He laid the bottle down on her muff as she declined to take it.

"I tell you I will not have it!" she said angrily.

She took up the vial from her muff and threw it on to the hearth. It smashed on the tiles just as Roland appeared at the doorway.

Hilda went up to him. "Roland, ask this man to go. I cannot endure his presence."

Roland pressed her to him and looked across at the doctor, who took up his hat at once.

"Women are ungrateful creatures! Till to-morrow, Roland."

He went out and the two were left alone. Hilda laid her head down on Roland's shoulder as they stood together in the darkening room.

"Oh, Roland, if I could die here in your arms."

## CHAPTER VIII

WHEN Hilda came down from Roland's rooms nearly two hours later she looked more as she had done in the Como days, and less like the pale shadow of the past few weeks. Love, instead of virtue, is its own reward, might be more truly said, for as long as one loves and is loved one must be to a certain extent happy, whatever the circumstances, however fiercely everything else ranges itself against us. Soothed and comforted, in spite of all that terribly portentous interview with both the doctor and Clive, cheered and happy, simply because she had been in Roland's arms and he was satisfied and pleased with her, she came down the stairs with a light step, a little colour in her cheeks, a soft brightness in her eyes. She drove home in a taxi, and as Mrs. Thorne and Rose were both still out she passed up to her room without comment, and began to dress for dinner. She put on a black lace gown; she thought from now onward to her wedding she would not care to put on anything but black.

When they were all together after dinner, and the servants out of the room, she said:

"I went to see Roland this afternoon," and before Mrs. Thorne could follow up her look of surprised

reprehension by any remark, she added, "Now I do hope you will both be satisfied. I had a proposal of marriage to-day, and I have accepted it. I am engaged, and Roland begged me to ask you to write what time he may come to see you to explain all the details."

She was very white as she spoke, and her voice had rather a strained tone, otherwise she seemed quite calm and self-possessed. Rose and her mother looked at each other thunderstruck. This seemed such a complete reversion of Hilda's attitude on the night of the dance that they could hardly believe what they heard.

"Is . . . is it Sir James?" faltered Mrs. Thorne. The bracelet had not yet been returned, and she hoped now might never have to be.

"No. I have accepted a man who does not know how much I am injuring him. Perhaps even I am not injuring him, as he will like his life better with me than where he is now. He is one of Doctor Harrington's patients at Longhurst."

Mrs. Thorne sank back in her chair in silence. Rose sprang to her feet.

"An idiot! You've no right to do such a thing!" she exclaimed furiously. "You have no right to give me a maniac for a brother-in-law!"

Hilda looked across at her with a cold quiet gaze for a minute. Then she said: "You did not consult me before you decided on *my* brother-in-law,

otherwise you know I should not have chosen Mr. Heywood."

"But a maniac, a madman, an idiot!" expostulated Rose. "People will know it."

"Nobody need know it," replied Hilda quietly, "unless you are foolish enough to tell them. He seems quite sane."

"But why not have taken Sir James?" returned Rose, "if you are going to marry at all."

"Because," Hilda answered steadily, looking at her sister, "I could not give myself to a man while I was loving somebody else. In this case there is no question of it. Clive Talbot will not ask anything of me. We shall live just as if we were relation; I shall be Roland's still."

"Oh, that's it! I see!" replied Rose furiously. "This is a scheme of Roland's! to marry you to a madman and disgrace the family, just to keep you for himself!"

"Hush, Rose!" broke in Mrs. Thorne. "Hilda, tell me, who is this man? What is his name? Has he any means to keep you?"

"Yes, I think the doctor or Roland said he would come into a good estate and money when he is twenty-five — he is only about twenty-four now. But Roland will come and tell you all about it; he will explain it all to you."

Mrs. Thorne looked considerably relieved at the mention of the estate.



"What is his name, did you say?"

"Clive Talbot."

"Talbot is a good name; he may come of a very old family. When did you meet him?"

"Only this afternoon. He was with Doctor Harrington at Roland's place."

"But, my dear child, I don't understand at all. Is he under Doctor Harrington's care? I must telephone to Roland to come this evening if he can."

"Yes, do, he said he would come."

"What sort of a person is this man to look at? Is he presentable?"

"I should say much more than that," answered Hilda. "I think he is very handsome."

Rose had been leaning on the table listening intently.

"What is he like?" she asked, now wistfully. Worldly though she was, and covetous of this world's goods, the thought of the unwieldy form, the diseased face and hideous record of her fiancé hung in her brain day and night, filling her with apprehension that grew sharper as the wedding-day approached. The longing of youth to mate with youth and health and beauty was not quite crushed out of her. This man was twenty-four and handsome. . . . She listened eagerly to her sister's answer.

"He is tall and straight and distinguished-looking, with beautiful features and large dark eyes and very thick dark hair. No one could say anything

against his looks. You can feel quite content about that."

Rose sighed deeply, and Mrs. Thorne asked:

"Then what is the matter with him? Why is he at Longhurst? I don't see."

"Roland said it was a form of insanity called amentia. You must ask him about it. It only shows in certain circumstances; he does not understand things fully, that's all."

"The worst of it is, if the brain is affected at all, one never knows how much more severe or even dangerous that madness may get at any moment. I think there is a great risk in marrying such a man. Are you not afraid yourself?"

Hilda looked across at her mother with calm resolute eyes.

"No, I don't care very much what happens to me if I am to be separated from Roland. You say I must marry someone. Well, I would rather run the risk of an insane husband strangling me in a fit of madness than be called upon to give myself to a sane one — under all the circumstances."

Mrs. Thorne sighed. Hilda seemed always to have such an unreasonable way of looking at things. How was it that she had ever had such a daughter? There was silence for a minute, and then Hilda said:

"If I may, I will go to bed now. I am tired, and Roland will make it all clear to you better than I can."

"Very good, go if you like. I will telephone over to him now," and as her mother rose to cross to the telephone, Hilda left the room and went upstairs to the welcome quiet and darkness where she could close her eyes and live over again the hours in Roland's arms.

After Mrs. Thorne had sent the message she and Rose looked at each other in silence as they sat alone where Hilda had left them.

"Nice thing! to have a maniac brought into the family," remarked Rose gloomily, after a minute.

"Yes," replied Mrs. Thorne, "a great pity she would not accept Sir James. However, if she consents to this, better let her do it if the man is really tolerable. I shall be able to judge better when I have seen him. We are not going to marry him. So long as his madness is of a kind that doesn't show and if Hilda prefers him, as she says, to a normal husband, it need not worry us very much."

"No, I suppose not," assented Rose in a depressed tone, and sat in silence staring at the fire. Visions of her sister's life at Como with Roland, the handsome, athletic, clear-skinned Roland, painted themselves in the glowing coals, and then others of this young husband, with his twenty-four years and his thick dark hair, and behind and among them all grinned and peered at her a bloated face beneath a bald grey-fringed head — the face of the man she had

chosen. She was so deeply sunk in unpleasant contemplation that her mother's voice quite startled her.

"You had better go, dear, and leave me to see Roland alone."

She rose and wished her mother good night and went away to her own room, and a few minutes later Roland entered. He and Mrs. Thorne had not met since he had written to her and made the arrangements for Hilda to visit Mrs. Howard at Como, and the cheeks of both were a little pale as they shook hands and greeted each other.

About people of the world there is little melodrama. However deep the feelings may go, little of them usually shows on the surface. Mrs. Thorne, on the stage, might have refused to touch the hand of the villain who had betrayed her daughter, but Mrs. Thorne, in real life, shook hands as usual with Roland as he came into the Mayfair drawing-room.

Roland also showed none of the conventional signs of guilt. He neither coloured nor hesitated nor seemed confused. Quiet and unmoved as usual he took the chair she offered.

"Roland, I should not have thought it of you!" was all Mrs. Thorne said, in a quiet tone, when they were seated.

"My only excuse, if that is any excuse," Roland answered, "is that I love your daughter as I never thought it possible to love anyone. To me she is

perfect. I would give my life almost to marry her if I could." He spoke quietly, but there was no mistaking the intensity of feeling in his voice.

Mrs. Thorne was somewhat softened. "Yes, I know, but . . ."

"*I* know . . ." he interrupted her. "There is nothing to be said for me. Of course, you must feel how I curse myself now for all the trouble I have brought on her and you all, but it's no use discussing that — how I can help you, what little I can do to repair things is what we have to consider."

"What do you think of this man Clive Talbot? Is it a good thing for her to marry him, do you think?"

"I think so. Has Hilda told you about him?"

"Yes, but I can hardly understand. Is he mad or not?"

"Well, he is under Harrington's care, but the doctor says there's no insanity in his family, which is a very good one. Simply in some way the boy's development has been checked. He is not entirely grown up; he has no comprehension yet of sex or its meaning. That is a great merit in Hilda's eyes."

"And in yours too? Come, Roland, you advise this marriage for yourself, don't you?"

Roland looked down at the carpet thoughtfully, as if trying to decide with himself if this were so.

"Perhaps I am influenced," he said at last. "But

I have no wish to force Clive upon you or Hilda if you can do better for her, but I doubt if she would accept anyone else."

"So do I," she returned.

"Harrington, who is one of the trustees, says at five-and-twenty he comes into a fine estate in the North, and some thousands a year. I have the papers here, and we can go over them. The boy has no parents apparently, and was put under Harrington's care quite early. Whether or not he tried any of his abominable experiments on him and so put him into this state, I don't know. Naturally the doctor does not tell me that. There are the facts. He will have money and a certain position; he is very nearly sane, and Hilda does not object. It is for you to decide."

"I must see Clive first. When can you get him here?"

"The day after to-morrow. Will you ask him to dine here? Then you can see exactly how he behaves."

"Yes, that will be the best perhaps. You arrange that with Harrington, will you, that he comes here to dine about eight? Now show me all you can about his land, and what income they will have."

They drew up together to the table and Roland spread out the papers he had brought. Till midnight they sat up over them, talking of and discussing various matters, and when he left Hilda's future was

virtually decided, subject to the fact of Clive being "presentable."

On the day appointed the Thornes were expecting him to dinner, Hilda sat white and listless in a chair in a pale green gown she had often worn at Como. She loved it because Roland's arms had so often crushed it, because the lace in one place had been torn under his caress, and she would never mend that little rent. Rose, looking flushed and beautiful with excitement, sat opposite, the more interested of the two in the coming guest. At a few minutes past eight Mr. Clive Talbot was announced, and with a good deal of curiosity Mrs. Thorne rose to meet him.

Clive came into the room with his natural easy manner and carriage. He was well dressed; his evening clothes fitted him perfectly, and he wore them with that ease which generally characterises the gentleman who wears them daily, as opposed to the common man who may put them on occasionally.

Doctor Harrington had at Longhurst a small collection of patients that he always kept ready for show. They would do him credit he knew, and he kept their clothes up-to-date and saw they were in all ways ready for the showcase. Clive was one of these, and the doctor, who was also his guardian, took a particular interest in him and constantly had him to dine at his own table.

To-night he looked unusually well. The pleasure and interest of seeing Hilda again had lighted his face with animation. Rose gazed upon him spell-bound with astonishment, and Mrs. Thorne herself had a shock of pleased surprise. In spite of what Hilda had said, the words "Longhurst," "Asylum," and "patient" had brought their own visions with them, and they indefinitely thought of a weedy shambling figure in hanging clothes, pale, awkward, long-haired, and vacant-eyed; a contrast indeed to the handsome Clive with his fine features and well-bred air, who was shaking hands with them now. He had brought some flowers for Hilda, and he presented them easily and naturally to her. It had not been his own idea to bring them, but when the doctor had suggested it to him he had accepted it with delight, and shown the greatest interest — and extravagance — in their purchase. They were white, lilies of the valley and white roses from the hot-house, expensive and difficult to obtain at that time of the year. Hilda thanked him and said they were lovely, as indeed they were, and fastened some of them against her green silk bodice. Clive, after the usual common-places of conversation had been exchanged with Rose and Mrs. Thorne, took a chair by Hilda, and as he did so his eyes fell on the books lying on a small table near her. He recognised them directly.

"Are you a Greek scholar too?" he said, de-



lightly picking up her little volume of Herodotus and looking into it. "I am very fond of Greek."

"So am I," returned Hilda, smiling. "Have you read all the Greek plays? I think they are splendid."

Mrs. Thorne and Rose looked on approvingly as these two rapidly drifted into an animated discussion of their favourite authors.

Clive was certainly a great relief to them. So far as they could see at present no one could possibly tell there was anything wrong with him, and neither could feel ashamed of such a brother or son-in-law.

Over Rose's face, indeed, came a strange look — was it envy? — as she watched him talking to her sister. And Mrs. Thorne was pleased to notice how well Clive would fit in with the scheme of lies her busy active brain was already preparing to give out to her friends and acquaintances, her enemies and to Society generally, on Hilda's wedding. She studied him carefully as, wholly absorbed in Hilda, he sat and talked. He was so conveniently handsome that it made her proposed story of Hilda meeting him abroad and suddenly falling in love with him and insisting on marrying him at once perfectly plausible. Longhurst was to be entirely suppressed. He had been travelling abroad, studying with his tutor in Italy, when Hilda met him. She thought that would do, as Roland seemed to think Clive could be easily instructed what to say and

to avoid saying. They would certainly look the youthful romantic couple to perfection, and a few hints given out as to the estate in the North and Clive's expectations, would quite account for the mother's approving their sentimental feelings. Yes, it really seemed as if appearances could be made all right; and ordinarily Society does not seek to penetrate further. Particularly in this case she would allow it no time to do so. The ceremony, she had determined, should be as public as possible; orthodox and conventional to its last detail. There should be nothing covered or questionable about *that*, and afterwards the two would be packed off into the country far from any prying eyes or listening ears.

As there would be some little delay about Clive's own property being available since he was not really to be master of it till he was twenty-five, Roland had offered to Mrs. Thorne the use for a year of his own place, Whitfield, in the country. It was a small unpretentious place, but pretty and ready for occupancy. They would go down there and be his guests while he was away in Egypt. This seemed an easy way to arrange things. There would be no honeymoon, they would go straight there and lose themselves in a romantic solitude. All this was mapped out in the mother's brain as she looked at them, and her brow smoothed itself, as all seemed falling in with her plans so well.

The dinner was a great success. Clive could talk

well, and from his habit of dining with the doctor and discussing current events with him, had a wide range of subjects; politics, the size of our now miniature Navy, art, rowing, swimming, and the various editions of Homer that had appeared recently, were among the matters touched on and conversed about, and in all of these Clive showed to advantage. Had any of the deep questions of life come up to the surface of their light and brilliant talk, he would have shown at once a blankness, an absence of grip on them. But as these *are* seldom or never touched on in public, and as everything relating to sex is absolutely taboo, as sex itself is supposed by society not to exist, and in conversation — at least in English conversation — is entirely ignored, Clive passed through the dinner-table talk exactly as any other well-trained person would do.

Rose hung on his words and watched the bright smiling young lips part in constant laughter over the fresh white teeth with a strange look in her eyes. A philosopher and a reader of faces would have said it was the same as comes into the desert wanderer's dying orbs as he gazes on the far-off oasis he knows he is doomed never to reach.

Through all the evening Clive kept them amused and interested, and it was only just at the very last that his self-possession failed him. As they had all risen to say good night he drew from his pocket a little square package, and then stood with it silent

in his hand. There was an awkward pause and silence for a moment, then Mrs. Thorne, guessing at his intention, came to his rescue.

"Is that a present for Hilda?" she said gently, smiling, as Clive turned over the little package in his hand, staring at it as if he had never seen it in his life before. Clive looked up at once and smiled too.

"Yes," he said brightly, in a relieved tone, and the key having been given him now again to his actions he opened the little box and drew out a ring. "If I have your consent and Hilda allows me I should like to put this on her hand." He spoke a little stiffly, coldly, automatically.

The doctor had arranged this and told him exactly what to say when he presented the ring, and he now recited the words as a lesson. It was not only, however, the fact that it was a mere effort of memory and repetition which oppressed Clive and made him feel ill at ease; it was a sense of the significance which lay in the giving of the ring that he knew he did not understand and could not grasp. He understood that the action linked him to her in some way, and there was a glorious joy in the fact, but he vaguely felt that a mystery surrounded it all and her, which he was to be blamed or be pitied for not comprehending.

Hilda's face grew deathly pale at this final and open acceptance of another man in Roland's place, but she gave her slim white hand to Clive, who took

it, and with steady fingers slipped on the ring. It was a plain band of gold with one fine pearl in the centre supported by diamonds on each side. Hilda looked down at it with suffused and swimming eyes; to her quick fancy the pearl, the colourless stones with their pure white light, seemed instantly to symbolise the love that was being offered her now. Roland had also given her a ring, but his had been rubies — full of fierce and glowing fires.

The ring was a trifle large, but she slipped a thin gold one off her other hand and put it over Clive's to keep it in place.

"Thank you very much," she said, almost as formally as Clive had spoken, and they looked at each other for a second in silence. Hilda wondered whether he would kiss her. Clive looked at her with the most intense admiration and devotion shining in his eyes. She seemed to him like one of those wonderful amber, light-filled clouds that float at sunset across a neutral sky. But one does not think of kissing the sunset clouds, and Clive did not think of kissing her.

He pressed her hand gently as one handles a snow-drop, and then turned to Mrs. Thorne. "Good night; thank you for a very delightful evening. You will let me know, will you not, when I may come to see you again?"

Mrs. Thorne said good night warmly; she had taken an immense fancy to Clive, and did not hesi-

tate to show it. Rose wished him good night also with a wistful affection, and Clive left them, happy, in a sense overjoyed, only with a terrible melancholy clinging to him of things half understood and of things not understood at all.

Days passed, and guided by Roland and Mrs. Thorne, who worked with a feverish energy, Hilda's destiny was shaped for her, whilst she herself stood aloof from it, enveloped in a dull hatred of it all.

The wedding was fixed for the last day in November, about a month before that of her sister. The engagement was announced by a few lines in the papers, and all the little ceremonial of social life rigorously carried out.

In these last days of her freedom Hilda had some secret meetings with Roland at his rooms which alone enabled her to support the rest of her existence. Mrs. Thorne remonstrated and pointed out the folly and danger of it in vain. Hilda would not promise her not to go there, and as the time was short, and Hilda, docile and tractable in all else, Mrs. Thorne at last contented herself with cautioning Roland and hoping the visits would not be discovered.

And so in this hideous nightmare of lies, of pretence, of falsity, that was being assiduously woven round her, there remained a few simple hours of natural joy and love for Hilda, hours that whispered to her it was still worth while to live.

## PART II

### CHAPTER IX

**THE** morning of her wedding arrived, and Hilda, after a few hours' troubled sleep in the middle of the night, awoke at the first light and rose. A fury of anger, mingling with a sense of cold helplessness and despair, filled her; in her heart she felt mad with rage and pain on this which should be, and by our universal laws of humbug is always supposed to be, the happiest day in a woman's life.

How many women in England wake up with just the same feelings of revolt and pain and terror and longing for some man other than the bridegroom on their wedding day. Suffering and agonised like poor helpless slaves driven chained to the market-place they go to the altar; bound and driven indeed they are by that noble civilisation of which we are so proud.

Hilda commenced her toilet. Roland was to be there. One gleam of sunshine remained to her. To look fair in Roland's eyes, this the last time he saw her free.

She dressed in that quick way that comes from a heart beating and stifling in agony. She tried to tell herself that Roland would never be free, that he could never marry her, but a mocking voice in her ear kept telling her he might at any moment be free. And even if he never were, to her view that did not see merely the surface of things, but penetrated to the essential soul of them, it seemed so much better to live quietly and in seclusion somewhere as the mistress of a man she worshipped than married to another.

Rose had taunted her furiously on this.

"You would be content to be just a 'kept woman,' kept by Roland, and mother of an illegitimate child, perhaps more children, rather than have an honourable fine position and be surrounded with respect and everything you want."

And Hilda had answered calmly:

"Yes, far rather."

This morning she told herself she had been wicked and foolish. She ought to have kept to her own principles; she ought to have refused this dishonourable marriage; but Roland had an immense influence over her. It was almost impossible for her to disobey him, and he had refused to accept her plan; had told her he could not visit her, could not keep her on those terms. He would not share in her disgrace before the world. Like all men and women of the world, products of the world's training, what-



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ever was done in secret did not matter at all in his view, publicity alone made sins sinful.

He also told her she had no right to sacrifice her child, to bring it into the world a being which from the beginning would have a terrible burden on its head. But nothing would have moved her very much except that threat to leave her, to abandon her, which he had made and which she could not tell if he would really carry out or not.

He would come to her as a married woman, but not to her as an unmarried one. It was beyond her power to act contrary to the dictates of this man, to displease him. That she was not doing so now, that she was obeying him, following out his wishes, was her one comfort and support.

The maid knocked at the door at eight and was surprised to find Hilda already nearly dressed. There was nothing to be done but fasten the great white gown that Hilda felt she hated as if it had been an animate thing, as it lay out on the bed, and arrange her veil and wreath, and fasten her long gloves. All this could be done later, so she told the maid to go and send up her breakfast, and then she slipped on a dressing-gown and sat down by the window, devoured by her awful thoughts.

The four ensuing hours passed like a hideous dream; she seemed to know nothing of them. The going down and seeing Rose and her mother smiling and gorgeous in their wedding clothes; the dull hatred

she felt of them since they were her betrayers; the drive to the church; the profanity of the long service as it seemed to her under the circumstances; the sight of Clive, handsome, charming, self-possessed as usual, beside her — all this seemed to pass by senses dulled by grief and horror as by some heavy opiate. There was only one glorious moment in it all, one moment of life, and that was when in the vestry Roland came up and kissed her. Other people had kissed her, she did not know who they were. Clive did not kiss her. No one told him to do so, so he did not. Then from the little crowd round her she saw Roland come forward, and he advanced and kissed her. Oh, the joy of that moment, the electric contact with him again! She was alive. It was not like their kisses, of course; it was just a moment's hard pressure of his lips on her cheek and an iron closing of his hand on hers, a whispered "dear little girl," but it was life, it was love and joy that she felt at that time she would never know again. Then he stepped back and mingled with the other figures as much as he could mingle with them, but his height, his carriage, his small head so well set on his fine neck, made the eye easily follow him in a crowd.

Hilda was grateful to him. He had woken her to pain, but that seemed better than the icy numbness gripping her before. Now like a volcano beneath its snows, her heart seemed flaming and bursting with agonised longing. Oh, what intensity of joy if it had

been Roland's arm beneath hers now. If it had been Roland who had followed her into the little brougham; if she could have felt his arm round her and let herself, her life, as it were, melt and dissolve under his kisses.

Clive was there beside her, easily happy, in good spirits. He could not see Hilda's face very distinctly under its lace veil that she kept down. She seemed to him rather white and silent, but she looked very much like the pictures he had seen of brides, dressed in their white and veil-covered, and looking down gravely at their bouquets, so he thought it was all right, and felt keenly overjoyed himself at the prospect of having Hilda all for his own, living with her instead of at Longhurst, and their going off to the country together.

Upstairs, when they had reached the drawing-room, Hilda was surprised that it seemed so full. She did not know that her mother had invited such a number of people. She felt she hated them all. They were all called there to witness her crime and shame in pledging to another all that should have been given to the man her own nature had selected. She felt her one wish in that crowd was to get as far away from Doctor Harrington, whom she saw amongst the guests, and as near to Roland as possible.

When they took their places at the long and beautifully embowered and wreathed table she found

her place beside Clive was opposite to Roland, and from that moment did nothing else but gaze at his grave quiet face in a sad sort of dream. It looked across at her so kindly, protectingly and with a great sadness also in the eyes behind their approval. It was her one consolation that he was not angry with her, that in this hideous act at least she was doing only as he had bidden her. She took every dish that was offered her, and if she could not eat, the plate held the courses there till it was taken away. She did not care how long the luncheon lasted, since she could gaze at Roland. It might go on for ever so far as her wish was concerned, for after it came separation from him, and then nothingness for ever and ever.

He was pleased with her, that was something. She saw that in every line of the pale distinguished face; he had said it was necessary. That would have been something too if she had been able to believe it, but she was not. "An evil is never necessary," she had replied firmly to him when he had said it, and angered him a little by her answer, but in her heart she was convinced she was right.

After a time servants ceased to hand her things, and she heard some speeches being made. Then she recognised Doctor Harrington was standing up and saying a lot about her and Clive and all the happiness they were going to have. She did not listen; only continued to keep her eyes on Roland.

Then suddenly she heard the droning sound of the doctor's voice cease; a servant had entered the room and approached him. Hilda turned her head and saw a telegram being handed to him.

Suddenly, it seemed to her, her heart began to beat violently, a sense of intense interest came all round her. A man like the doctor might have fifty telegrams of no great import, but something seemed to grip her brain as she saw him unfold the paper. After excusing himself Doctor Harrington glanced through the wire, and an involuntary exclamation broke from him.

The guests had been talking and laughing amongst themselves, they abruptly became silent, and all eyes turned enquiringly towards the doctor as he read the message through to himself a second time. Then he looked up over his spectacles. Everyone waited for him to speak. He looked across to where Roland was sitting.

"Roland, this wire concerns you. Mrs. Thorne, if you would be so very kind as to excuse us, I should like to ask Colonel West to come outside with me. This is an important matter."

Before Mrs. Thorne could answer Hilda had sprung to her feet. She was at the doctor's side, and her hand was on his wrist in an instant.

"Tell me what is in that wire," she said. She was whiter than the cream satin she wore, blue shades were gathering round her lips and eyes, but she

spoke calmly, and her grip on the man's arm hurt like the grip of steel.

"My dear young lady, it does not affect you."

"You said it did."

"Pardon me, I said it concerned Colonel West."

No one of the party moved; they all looked on in an astonished silence except Roland and Clive, who both rose from their seats.

"Read out the wire," demanded Hilda.

The doctor made no answer, but pursing his lips together he began to fold it up. Hilda with a sudden swift movement put her hand upon it and tore it out of his grasp. She glanced at it, then with one agonised cry that made them all start to their feet, so horrible was its accent of suffering, she fell suddenly to the ground before either Clive or Roland could save her. The latter stooped over her as she lay at his feet and picked her up in his arms. Everyone pressed round as he carried her to the sofa. Mrs. Thorne came up with an ashen face, and as Roland laid her on the couch tried to take the telegram from her, but her hand was closed over it as a vice, and she could not unlock the fingers. Roland, with his arm under the unconscious head, told her curtly to desist.

"Open the window and bring some cold water," he said, and Doctor Harrington came up and bent over the girl.

"She may be unconscious some time," he said,

after a brief look at the eye-balls. "Best get her out of this and up into her own room if possible." He looked at Mrs. Thorne, and his glance said: "When she does come to, God knows what she may say; better have the audience small."

"Roland, can you carry her up?" Mrs. Thorne asked feverishly. Oh, what a hateful, tiresome girl this was to make a scene like this! The Hon. Bertie Heywood stood looking on with a sarcastic smile. Rose stood almost as blanched as her sister behind the couch. What if Hilda should reveal the whole thing now!

"Yes, I can carry her easily," replied Roland.

"And you come too, doctor, won't you, and see what you can do," Mrs. Thorne said.

Then she excused herself to her guests, said she had no doubt Hilda would recover in a few minutes, and that she would return; and then followed Roland with his burden from the room.

What nameless feelings of delight, all black-bordered with despair, ran through him as his arms clasped that senseless form to him. Was Como back with him again? He almost wished those shallow flights of stairs were higher that he might longer have her there against his heart. He guessed the nature of the wire. Only one thing could be telegraphed from Longhurst which would affect him—news of his wife. What that news was he did not ask himself. He would know soon enough.

He reached Hilda's room. Everything was packed and ready for the departure of its mistress. Her travelling things lay on a chair. A trunk stood open to receive her wedding dress. Roland walked across the floor gently and laid her on the bed. As he did so her arm fell limply to her side, the fingers of the hand relaxed, and the crumpled paper fell to the floor. Roland picked it up and read:

"Mrs. Roland West died of acute mania this morning. Please wire when you can return." It was addressed to Doctor Harrington, and came from Longhurst.

Roland's eyes had taken the words in, in one flash, just as Hilda's had done. He handed the paper to Mrs. Thorne, then walked away to the window, mechanically and in silence, and stood there looking out. As Hilda had said, perhaps an evil is never necessary. So, had they waited, as the old Greeks were wont to say, "a god would have found out a way." So, he was free, after twenty years' bondage; free on the day they had claimed her for life. So, he could have been there in Clive's place; so, he could have had her, taken her; they might again have known paradise together had he but listened to her appeal.

The blow was so great that it stunned him; only those few disjointed thoughts flashed across the blackness of his brain.

Mrs. Thorne sat in an arm-chair, her head buried



in her hands, the telegram crushed in her lap. How unfortunate, how unfortunate! If they could but have known sooner! she was thinking. What an unlucky woman she was! all this worry and anxiety and trouble for nothing. Roland and Hilda could have married each other and been as silly and romantic and happy as they chose, and all this doubtful and uncertain alliance with a man in Clive's condition avoided. A better and more brilliant match for her daughter, a richer and more satisfactory son-in-law for herself. None of these black looks and intimations she was a murderess; everything quite as she would have wished it — had they only waited. She rocked herself backwards and forwards, and some tears forced themselves through her lids. What an unlucky, unjustly unlucky woman she was!

Doctor Harrington was bending over Hilda; he had poured a little brandy down her throat and thrown cold water on her already ice-cold face; a chill draught from the window blew across her, but she did not respond nor move.

What would this crazy girl want to do now that she knew her lover was free? Mrs. Thorne asked herself, looking on at the doctor's unsuccessful efforts to rouse her. Could they ever persuade her to go through with this marriage now? She glanced at Roland. His face was hidden, but all the grace of his figure struck her. It occurred to her suddenly he had better be got rid of out of sight before the girl

recovered. She had better not see him again, but as soon as she was able to start off with Clive, be packed into the motor and started on her married life. The telegram had not been read aloud; once Hilda and all her illness and abstracted looks were out of the way, the wedding guests would talk and conjecture and scandalise a little, and then forget it all. The girl once married, little more scandal could be made out of her, unless she ran away, or until, in the usual course, some divorce proceedings came along.

Roland felt a touch on his arm and turned. Mrs. Thorne stood close beside him, white and nervous-looking.

"Roland, I really think you had better go now and not see Hilda again when she recovers. I shall get her off with Clive as soon as I can. It's no use now going into what might have been, is it?"

She was a little alarmed at all she saw in his face; the intense look of repressed suffering on it overawed her. Doctor Harrington seconded Mrs. Thorne.

"Colonel West must come with me," he said. "There are several matters connected with this unfortunate occurrence that need his attention, and as to my patient, it will be far better for her if she is alone with her mother when she comes to. Will you come with me, Roland? She will be conscious in a few moments."

Roland's eyes went to the collapsed figure on the bed. Then he turned with the doctor to the door. "As you wish," he said merely, and without any leave-taking of Mrs. Thorne went out. The doctor, after a word or two regarding Hilda, followed him.

Mrs. Thorne sat down by the bed, and in a moment or two Hilda unclosed her eyes.

"Where is Roland?" she said immediately, and searched all round the room for him.

"He had to leave, dear," replied Mrs. Thorne smoothly. "Are you better now? How do you feel?"

"I feel all right. I fainted, I suppose, did I?" Hilda answered; her voice was wonderfully calm and natural.

"Yes, you did. It was not very strange that you should. So much strain and excitement, but it's all over now. When you feel up to it you can just change your dress and get off quietly with Clive."

Hilda lay still; her face was quite colourless, but her eyes were open and perfectly calm; she seemed thinking quietly.

"Roland left with Harrington, I suppose, after reading the wire," she remarked after a second, not seeming to consider her mother's speech. Mrs. Thorne felt surprised. After such a crisis of emotion, after so long a lapse from consciousness, she expected some mental confusion, even perhaps — and

this she hoped — forgetfulness of the wire and its contents. But there was none of this. Calm, reasonable, sensible, Hilda lay there talking as if she had never fainted at all.

“Yes, Roland was obliged to go. There would be much for him to attend to, I suppose. It was a most strange thing his wife should die this very day. How much misery we should all have been spared if this had happened a little sooner!”

“You see, as I said, there was no necessity for my marriage,” Hilda answered quite calmly. “Roland is free now. Everything would have turned out all right if you would have left it to me.”

“Yes, but we couldn’t tell that.”

“Well, it’s never any use in this life because you may have done one thing that is evil or foolish, trying to mend it by doing something more evil and more foolish. But this last I believe can be undone. I believe we could get this ceremony annulled.”

Mrs. Thorne felt alarmed. What would such an annulment mean if attempted? What facts would it not drag into the light. It could only be annulled on the ground that Hilda had been forced into marriage with one not of sound mind. And then, what had been the reasons for such a desperate action? Clive’s insanity, so carefully veiled and covered and overshadowed, would have to be insisted on in every way, thrown up in hardest lights to make the plea for dissolution of the marriage stand. It would never

do to begin such a train of long scandalous enquiry and publicity.

"I should think decidedly not," she said, with asperity. "The law never likes to annul a marriage. It would be folly to attempt it."

Hilda closed her eyes, as if faint or wearied with talking.

"Perhaps so," she merely answered.

Mrs. Thorne felt relieved at her acquiescence, and leant over her tenderly.

"Try and rest quietly, dear, for a little while, and I will go back to the others and tell them you are better. Clive must be so anxious."

She kissed Hilda on the forehead, and then went tip-toe out of the room. As soon as the door was closed Hilda rose and sat upon the bed. She felt ill, her head was swimming and her vision uncertain, but a great hope and light seemed kindled in her mind. She had only one thought, one determination, to get to Roland as quickly as possible and hear what he thought. She slipped from the bed and stood upright on trembling ankles. She could do nothing, dressed as she was in all these lumbering white clothes, and she began to tear them off as fast as she could. It did not take her long, filled as she was by the fury of haste, and she was soon rearrayed in her travelling dress, a dark prune-coloured cloth, and all the details completed, from her neat little kid boots to the small velvet toque and pale kid

gloves. Then she opened her door and stood for a second with a beating heart. No one was on the stairs; all the life of the house seemed concentrated in the reception room; she heard voices and laughter faintly coming from there. Soon the guests would be dispersing. She could get down the stairs now and out without notice. Like a flash she slipped down flight after flight and reached the hall, encountering nobody. She opened the door; a taxi-cab was crawling slowly by outside. She hailed it, sprang in, and was whirled towards Roland's chambers. She leant back in the cab. To be going to him was such a joy. The knowledge he was free seemed to flood the whole horizon of her thought with light. The weight of her own chains was almost forgotten.

The short dull November afternoon was closing in rapidly, and Roland's rooms were almost in darkness; still he did not move to seek a light. He sat buried in one of his deep arm-chairs, before a neglected and dying fire. His rooms were cleared up. Everything was packed and ready for his leaving, for he had intended to start for Egypt on this evening. Now, however, he would have to go down to Longhurst first, and his departure would be delayed for a week. The doctor was coming round for him later, and they would take the nine o'clock train to the country together. As he sat there he heard the door open behind him, but was too deep in painful

thoughts to move or turn. It shut again, and in another instant there was a warm presence beside him, a hand clasped on his, and then Hilda was in his arms. "Oh, Roland, Roland!" Her arms were round his neck; she was kissing him on his hair, his eyes, his mouth, in the old passionate way.

"Oh, I am so glad to be here! I was so afraid I might not find you. I got away from them all; escaped without anyone seeing me. I wanted to say, now you are free, let me come with you."

Roland's arms were round her, tightly enlaced. How she sank and sank against his breast, as if to her natural home.

"My freedom has come too late," he answered bitterly. "Don't you see that you are tied? Don't you remember that you were married this morning?"

"I went through an absurd form with a madman, yes, but surely that need not separate us. Clive would never claim me. You are starting for Egypt; you are free. Take me with you."

"It is just as impossible now as it was before. In the eyes of the world you are married."

"Such a marriage could be legally annulled, since Clive does not understand it."

"Perhaps it could, but only at the cost of publicity, scandal, disgrace, all that we have been trying to avoid."

There was a sort of cold hardness in his tones, sign of his intense suffering that chilled her.

Roland's pain was so deep it was beyond all expression, and the sight and the touch of her, of that warm, lovely, living form that he had so needlessly, so carelessly, made over to another man, sharpened his misery. Hilda lifted her head from his breast where it had been resting, and rose from his knees where she had been sitting.

"Oh, why did you make me do it?" she exclaimed. "When I was free, why did you put chains upon me? I felt it would be like this."

"You know why I did it: to protect you in the eyes of the world."

"The world! You will drive me mad with that word. But look here, Roland; now that we see it is a mistake and now that it is no longer necessary let us undo it. We can, I am sure. Let us file a petition, or whatever is the right thing to do, at once."

She had taken a chair beside him, and now leant her elbow on the little table between them, looking at him earnestly from under her straight brows, above which lay so prettily a smooth shining strand of hair, just seen beneath the dark velvet brim of her small coquettish hat. The sweeping line of her low slender waist, the swell of her bosom, was visible beyond the sharp edge of the table. Roland gazed at her silently with sore burning eyes. There was nothing in the world he felt he wanted so much.

"The difficulty is this," he said, after a minute. "I have no idea how long a legal process of this sort



would take; many months, I should think, at the least, with all the usual delays of the law, and we are in a position where we cannot wait. Long before that time your condition would become evident, probably the whole history would be disclosed; our motive for your marriage with Clive; our knowledge that he had been at Longhurst. You would be absolutely ruined socially, even if the annulment were granted in the end, which I very much doubt, as we could not establish that we were ignorant of his state before you entered into the marriage. The reason for your seeking it, and now, the only reason for your seeking relief from it—the death of my wife—would be sure to come out. Ever since I saw that wire, as you may suppose, I have been going over and over all this to find a way out, but I am afraid there is none.”

Hilda, gazing back at him, even through the gloom, could see new lines of age and pain traced in that dear countenance she loved, that told her the truth of what he said. She listened in a passion of resentment and pain.

“Well, I won’t go and live with Clive,” she exclaimed. “I shall run away and find a desert island somewhere away from this detestable world.”

“My darling, be reasonable. I am only going away for a year. Why will you not accept your position which gives you safety and honour until I return, and then what is there to prevent our taking up our real life together? Clive will not know any-

thing; we can be happy, as we have been in the past. Dearest, come here, kiss me; promise me to do as I ask you."

"I can't bear that idea of a life of deception. It is all so wretched. Take me with you now; do take me."

"It is absolutely impossible. I am going with the regiment. Do you suppose that I could as its colonel take with me the bride of another man? I should have to leave my profession; you would lose your position; we should both lose everything. There would be nothing then but that desert island you speak of for both of us."

Hilda rose from her chair and clasped both hands across her bosom; something seemed breaking there with longing.

"That would be so nice," she said softly. Her voice was very sweet; just like the æolian harps he had heard in Greece. She came up to him and sat down on the arm of his chair and put one hand over his eyes.

"Roland, listen to me for a moment. Let me paint you a picture; let me tell you what I see: A sparkling ocean of sapphire-blue on which the sun is dancing with millions of glittering rays, a semi-circle of hard brown sand studded with the purple and gold and rose of the gleaming seashells, a little hut made of bamboo and cane, with its door wide open to the fresh salt scent of the sea; above it,

rising against the luminous blue of the sky, two date palms wave their branches in the joyous breeze, and away and away behind the hut, in the soft distance, rises a chain of mountains, where the shadows lie cool and blue in the dawn before the sun rises and turns the peaks to gold. And the mountains are clothed with forests full of singing birds and sparkling rivulets of water which run down laughing to the sea. Within the hut is Roland sleeping in the noontide heat, and Hilda sits beside him watching him; a flagon of date-palm wine is by him, and the bread she has made for him and the fruit of the banana; a little child plays by the door with the green and gold dragon flies floating in on the sun's rays, and there is nothing but peace, deep peace, everywhere. There is no fighting, no discord, no rivalry between men and women, no vice, no deception, and no marrying nor giving in marriage; only . . . love and peace."

Her voice dropped away into silence. She clasped one hand round his neck, and still with the other over his eyes, bent down and kissed him. Roland laced his arms round her, spasmodically, suddenly.

"My darling, you must not tempt me beyond endurance."

"I want to tempt you beyond resistance," she returned desperately. "I feel I can't go on with this pretence. Think what it is for me to go to spend a year with that mad boy alone, knowing you

are free. The maddening waste of all this suffering! To think there was no need for it. If we had only waited you might have been in his place. Married to-day to *you*; starting to-night with *you*! It is too much. I can't bear it."

She slid to her knees and pressed both her burning hands on his. The touch went through all the man's veins like a current of fire.

"I must come with you. I don't care what I have to do, what I have to suffer. Let me come in disguise as a man, as a servant, anything. Let me come to Egypt and live there as an Egyptian woman. I will dye my face and hair, and put on their long blue dress, and live in a mudhouse just outside your barracks. I should be happy anywhere where I could see your face. You need never know I was there in the day, but at night, when the stars bent in the dark blue sky, you could come to me for an hour before the dawn. That hour would be my life. Don't drive me away from you. When two people love as we do, to separate is the greatest crime they can commit."

"My own, how you tempt me, how you torture me!"

"Let me come."

"Oh, if I could!"

"You wish to?"

"Not as things are, no."

"Then is it good-bye?"

"It must be."

As Roland spoke the sound of voices ascending from the hall outside reached them. He rose to his feet, drawing her up from her knees by her arms.

"Perhaps your people are coming to look for you. You must not be found here."

"I shall not hide. Let them come."

Roland drew her over to the inner door leading to the other rooms of his flat.

"You must not be found here. I will not have it. Go in there."

He opened the door and pushed her inside. She did not resist him, and he pulled the door shut, just as the other opened.

Mrs. Thorne, Rose, Bertie Heywood, Clive and Doctor Harrington all pressed into the room together.

"Oh, Roland," Mrs. Thorne exclaimed at once. "Hilda has disappeared. We have searched for her everywhere. At last I felt I must come to you. Have you seen her? Has she been here?"

Roland was perfectly calm. "No," he answered, putting a chair for her. "Certainly not. I have not seen her since I left your house this morning."

"Isn't it too dreadful? What can have become of her?"

"Did she recover from her fainting fit?"

"Yes, she seemed to recover very quickly, and I left her in her room to rest before changing her

dress. Then when I came back she was gone. She's not in the house; we've searched everywhere."

"Yes," chimed in Heywood sarcastically; "in the cellars and the attics, and all the old cupboards where the beautiful bride is so likely to have hidden herself!"

"Well, where do you suggest she is?" returned Mrs. Thorne, with whitening lips.

"Here, of course," he answered, throwing himself into a chair.

Mrs. Thorne and Rose both looked at him furiously. "Why?"

Roland interrupted them. "I say she is not here," he said quietly.

"Naturally you say so," returned Heywood bitingly; "but getting anyone to believe you is another thing."

Doctor Harrington came forward and, ignoring the others, said to Roland:

"I should think we had better inform the police."

"I should think you had better do nothing at all, but wait quietly till she comes back," he returned impatiently.

"That's what I have said all along," remarked Clive.

"I should tell the police to search the boat train that's going to take West to Dover, *en route* for Egypt," put in Heywood.

Clive turned to him with a mystified air. "Why?" he asked.

"How dare you say such things about my daughter?" demanded Mrs. Thorne angrily.

Rose looked at him with great reproachful eyes. "How can you, Bertie?" she said.

"My dear Mrs. Thorne," returned Heywood, "if you think you can throw dust in the eyes of Society by all this marriage business, it's all right; but you can't throw it in mine."

"Bertie!" Rose's eyes were full of tears.

"Don't you suppose I know all about your sister's tricks?" he continued contemptuously.

Roland looked down upon him from where he stood, with his arms folded across his breast, unmoved and cold.

"I don't know what Heywood means to insinuate," he said quietly; "all I can say is, I have no intention and no wish to take Hilda with me to Egypt."

The door behind him opened suddenly and Hilda herself walked through it into their midst. Mrs. Thorne rushed forward to her. Roland neither spoke nor moved; a statue could not have stood more white and silent.

"Hilda, what are you doing here?" her mother asked angrily.

Heywood looked across at her and laughed. "What did I say?" he asked.

Rose approached her. "Hilda, how dare you come here?"

Hilda raised her head even a little higher than it was usually carried and looked at them all with quiet defiance.

"I am here to say good-bye to Colonel West. I don't see why, I should not come."

Clive went to her side. "No, of course not," he said. "Why shouldn't she do what she likes?"

"Be quiet, Clive," said Mrs. Thorne angrily. "You don't understand. Hilda, this is disgraceful. You have frightened us all terribly."

"Look here," broke in Clive; "you are very fond of telling me I don't understand things, but I understand this. Hilda belongs to me now, more than to anyone else, and I won't have her bullied."

Hilda turned and smiled on him. "Thank you, Clive. If you don't complain, no one else need."

"Of course not! You shall do what you like."

Mrs. Thorne approached them impatiently.

"Your motor is waiting, Hilda. Are you ready to start with Clive now? All the luggage has been sent on."

Clive turned to her protectively, kindly.

"Hilda, do you want to come with me, or do you want to go to Egypt with Roland? You shall do what you like."

"Clive, you're ridiculous," remonstrated Mrs. Thorne.



"You may say what you please. I won't have Hilda bullied."

"Clive, you had better take your wife away," came the doctor's voice rather sternly from the other end of the room.

"I am ready to, but only if she likes. I won't have her bullied," he returned calmly.

"Mr. Talbot seems finding a will of his own," remarked Heywood sarcastically.

Clive took no notice, but turned to Hilda at his side.

"Hilda, if you'll come with me, it will be very jolly, really. It's not as if we were going to Longhurst. We have a nice little place in the country, and not a soul shall bother us. You shall do just as you like. You will have a better time with me than you would with Roland."

Hilda smiled faintly. She stood upright, facing them all as a deer stands at bay.

"I am coming, Clive. Good-bye, mamma."

"I am going to see you into your motor," returned Mrs. Thorne firmly.

Hilda made a few steps forward, and as she passed Heywood inclined her head. "Good-bye, Mr. Heywood."

"Good-bye, madam," he returned, bowing with affected earnestness; "I congratulate you on your decision to leave with your husband, though it is rather late."

Hilda turned to Rose, who stood beside him.

"And I congratulate you on the kind-hearted man you are going to marry."

Clive was close behind her. He looked at Heywood. "You cur," he said contemptuously; "I'll knock you down if you try to bully Hilda!"

"Clive," called the doctor warningly from the door.

Hilda looked back with one last look of unutterable sadness and longing to the kingly figure that had stood there so unmoved, so silent, through the scene.

"Roland, good-bye."

He started forward, then he checked himself. "Good-bye."

The next moment the door had closed upon them, all except the doctor, who had merely met the others on his way to Roland's place, and the two men were left alone.

Downstairs Mrs. Thorne, with a heart at once relieved and agitated, saw Hilda and Clive into their great white motor, and while she and Rose and Bertie, who was dining with them that night, took a taxi home, the car whirled the bridal couple swiftly through the now lighted streets to Whitfield. They both leant back against the cushions in silence. Clive was puzzling over the scene just gone through, and trying to settle in his own mind why Hilda had wanted to go to Egypt with Roland, and why the

others had prevented her. Hilda was exhausted and closed her eyes in a dull stupor of pain, only wishing it would drift on into unconsciousness and death. So they drove until in the distance the lights of the little village of Whitfield began to twinkle before them. Then Clive sat up and slipped his arm round her, tenderly, affectionately.

"Hilda, I am awfully sorry you are so unhappy at being with me. Dearest, is it my fault in any way? I would do anything rather than see you miserable."

Hilda roused herself. She must not be so selfish. She must not be unkind to this man who had no fault in any way. She yielded to his arm round her, and put her lips in a gentle little kiss on his cheek.

"You are only too good to me, dear. Whatever I suffer has nothing to do with you. And I am not unhappy because I am with you. I am glad to be with you and away from my hateful family. I like being with you."

Clive gave his quick, bright laugh.

"Do you really? That is splendid. Of course, I am in the seventh heaven, having you. It seems altogether too good to be true; like an enchanting dream."

He kissed her forehead where it lay against his shoulder, and just at that moment the car, which had swung through the village and up the park drive at a good pace, stopped at their door. The house

was well lighted up and looked warm and cheerful, even on the damp, foggy November evening. It was set amongst well-trimmed velvet lawns that sloped gently downwards from it to encircling belts of trees. Hilda's maid, who had gone on with the luggage, came out as the car stopped, and both she and the butler following her happened to see the close proximity and the embrace of the two occupants in the car under the electric lamp in the back. It seemed quite in order, and a little colour was in Hilda's face as she stepped out, while Clive, radiant with youth and good spirits, looked really the typical bridegroom. They went in together and up the stairs, Hilda expressing her pleasure at the beautiful flowers in the lighted hall, and only separated on the landing outside their rooms to go and dress. They had just time before the dinner hour. Hilda's maid had everything ready for her, her rose-coloured silk evening gown and all its accompaniments and *et ceteras* laid out on the bed, and while she brushed out her mistress's hair she discoursed on the beauty of the room and the comfort of the house, and all its internal arrangements.

"It is a really beautiful room," assented Hilda, looking round it over the rose and white carpet to the windows, richly hung and curtained in deeper rose. The walls were papered in rose with white bouquets on them, and long mirrors flashed from every side; the furniture was in rosewood and of deli-

cate Sheraton pattern. Deep arm-chairs and small tables bearing flowers in profusion suggested a drawing-room rather than a bedroom.

"Who do you suppose sent all those lovely white azalias?" she asked. "They must have come from London."

"Colonel West, madam; he sent down a great box, and we had a world of trouble to find vases for them and set them all out before you came."

Hilda's eyes swam suddenly with tears.

"Thank you, Ellen, that'll do for my hair. Where's my dress?" and she turned abruptly from the glass to hide them.

When she came down half an hour later she found Clive waiting for her in the dining-room, and he said she had never looked so lovely. Hilda smiled and thought of Como and her absolutely transfigured face in comparison with her pale calm countenance now. But if he were satisfied and pleased, so much the better; and the tender hue of her silk gown, the dazzling softness of her bosom and arms on which the pearls showed up a yellow-green, the bright waving hair did make up a vision of beauty, though the supreme light of passion and joy was not there.

The dinner was excellent, and Clive, like a boy, enjoyed it all and displayed a vigorous appetite and an appreciation of the good wines that delighted the old butler. Yet, boyish and healthy and strong as he was, there was never one touch of coarseness about

Clive. 'At the first glance at him, in any sort of clothes and in the most unfavourable circumstances, you would have said, "That is a gentleman, a man of good birth"; and in every action that indefinable stamp of innate refinement was there. He could not have done a coarse action, nor made a coarse gesture, any more than he could have uttered a coarse or vulgar phrase if he had tried. Somehow or other it would have twisted itself into something polished and gentlemanly before it left his lips.

They chatted through their meal, for Hilda forced herself not to appear anything but happy. It was impossible for her to altogether remain insensible of Clive's gay, handsome face and charming smile and ways.

"What a perfect brute that Heywood seems to be," he remarked. "I should think your sister would be very unhappy."

"Yes, I should think so. But, Clive, isn't it extraordinary that she goes on with it, that she can marry him? Just think of it! And I have talked to her so much about it. She cannot bear him to sit on the same sofa with her, and yet she's going to marry him; simply because he has a lot of money, and a big place in the country!"

"Well, if it's big enough I suppose she thinks she can get away from him!" laughed Clive.

They went to the drawing-room to take their coffee. The room, like all the rest of the house, was

pretty and inviting, full of shaded light. A sparkling fire burnt cheerily in the grate, and the white azalias were everywhere filling it with fragrance. It all was so perfect, only the one she longed for was not there! Clive drew forward an arm-chair for her to the fire and she sank into it. She was tired with real physical fatigue, and glad to sit quiet and silent while Clive poured out the coffee and brought it to her.

"This is different from being at Longhurst," he said delightedly, pulling up his chair opposite hers and looking round the room. "To be here, free, with no one to please or to obey but you."

Hilda roused herself.

"You must not talk like that, Clive. Obey me, nonsense. You are your own master now. You must get into the habit of forming your own wishes and resolutions, and trying to carry them out. The chief reason that you are different from other people is that you have so little wish or will of your own."

Clive laughed.

"It was not much use having a will where I have been. One was always being ordered about by somebody."

"Well, now it will be quite different. If anyone is to obey it should be me. You heard me promise that to-day."

"Yes, I did, and it rather amused me, but I didn't pay much attention to the service. I always un-

derstood it was very old-fashioned. Harrington said it was an obsolete old form that ought to be abolished."

Hilda looked at him as he sat on the opposite side of the fire. He was looking into it reflectively as he spoke, his chin leaning on one hand and the elbow on the chair arm; the fine noble profile was towards her and she felt a sudden deep admiration for him, and a wonder filled her as to how far he would be irresistible to a woman when he came into his full power of intellect, as he certainly would come sooner or later. She felt certain of it. He was wonderfully attractive now to look at; his pose and attitude were so easy; his form had all the strength and grace of youth; and her eye took in with pleasure the lines of the slender, well-moulded wrist within the snowy circle of the shirt cuff, and all the details of his dress with satisfaction, from the crimson silk socks and patent shoes to the perfectly cut and fitting dinner coat, with its single white blossom in the buttonhole.

"Clive," she said abruptly after a minute, "what do you think to yourself is the aim and object of marriage?"

He looked round from the fire.

"For two people to make each other perfectly happy, I suppose," he answered simply.

"Did anyone suggest that to you?"

He shook his head.

"No, I have always thought it was like that."



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"And if they fail, and make each other utterly miserable and want to separate, ought they to do so, do you think?"

"Well, naturally."

"Our law does not say so, all the same," returned Hilda drily. "The more unhappy they are, the more they long to get away from each other, the closer and tighter it tries to tie them up together."

Clive laughed.

"Very like most of man's doings," he said merely.

There was a long pause, and then she said gently,

"Clive, I am awfully tired. I should like to go to bed now."

"Let's then," he answered directly. "If we go to bed early we can get up early. I want to see this place by daylight, don't you?"

Hilda rose, and he went to the door and opened it for her. The staircase was lighted and empty and silent. Hilda had dismissed her maid after dinner and told her she should not want her again that night, and the other servants all seemed to have discreetly disappeared. They went up slowly, side by side, in silence. When they came opposite to her door he said:

"Hilda, are we going to sleep together? People do when they are married, don't they?"

Hilda raised her face towards him. It was very

white. She felt the ice on which they stood was thin and dangerous. But the safest plan, it seemed to her, was to be perfectly simple and natural, as she saw he was.

"Sometimes; not generally, I think," she said quietly.

"But surely they do," he persisted.

"You will see; we shall have some married couples staying with us probably by and by, and they will all ask to have separate rooms. It's only unmarried people who want to be together. In any case, dearest, I wish to be alone."

She took his hand and pressed it with an affectionate gesture in hers; the other was on the handle of the door.

"If you wish it, that settles it," replied Clive gently; "but I hate to lose sight of you for so many hours. Good night, dear."

He went into his room and closed the door gently, and Hilda went into her room and closed and locked the door. She sat down mechanically and there remained motionless. A long time passed; far off she heard from time to time a clock strike the passing hours. She did not heed them. She was filled with a maddening rage of resentment, so great she could hardly draw her breath; it seemed to herself she must die in that agony of feeling. Then all at once she got up and, like a tigress newly turned into its cage, began to walk up and down the floor with

swift silent feet, her hands clenched, her teeth clenched, striving to keep in check the consuming anger which rose in all her blood and brain like boiling floods of lava. She tried to keep herself from cursing Roland, but she felt she hated him, hated her mother, hated her family; above all hated the world that had made their conduct necessary.

She had been married that day. This was her wedding night. Why was not the man she loved beside her? He was free, his chains had been knocked off, just as she herself had been loaded with new ones. That was the culminating agony; all her suffering was so useless, so needless. But for her family's horrible mad act Roland might have been here. In natural peace and joy she might be sleeping in his arms. Within herself she bore his child, and all her heart and brain was on fire with love for him. Yet, to satisfy this Moloch of convention, she had been treated as a slave; sold, handed over to another. Truly a noble result of our noble civilisation! A revolt against her captivity, against separation from her mate, so awful, filled her to the brim of her tortured frame that she felt she could not support it. Reason or life itself would surely give way under it. Amongst all this hate of those who had forced her into this cage came the thought of Clive himself. He at least stood out in her mind guiltless; he had been with her from the first; only adoring in the distance; only longing to serve and

protect her. He had been with her in his stand against the horrible hypocrisy, the dishonourable unclean convention of the world. He had said, "Why don't you go to Egypt with Roland?" and at his own sacrifice he would have let her go. As she walked ceaselessly, tirelessly, through the silent hours of the night, the thought of Clive, as it came again and again to her, alone softened the fury of her rage, and this softening influence kept her reason in its place, prevented the racked brain giving way. Suddenly, after a time, the impulse came to seek him, to see him. In all the swirling mad pain of that day he had been the one steady rock in his persistent upholding of her, in his intuitive sympathy with a suffering he could not understand.

Yes, she would go and see him. He had not locked his door. She would glide in and see him sleeping. She need not disturb him. The first light of dawn was beginning to quiver in the sky and glimmer faintly in the room. She went out of it softly, and as softly entered Clive's.

He was sleeping in the large bed not far from the window, and the soft faint light of dawn, mingling with a lowered light in the room, showed him to her clearly between the white hanging curtains of the bed. She paused, gazing at him. He was wonderfully handsome, and for the first time the glory of youth in a man came home to her. Hitherto, having only loved a man in the prime of life, and

having rejoiced in all that force and courage of character, that power of intellect that only comes to a man with years, she had never thought about, never realised that youth also has its charms, though quite other ones.

She stood now, lost in awed wonder, looking at Clive and remembering the legend of the sleeping Endymion. He was lying on his back, one arm beneath his head, glossy and dark with its ruffled wealth of silky curling hair. The forehead gleamed smooth and white, with the magnificent sweeping lines of his straight brown eyebrows above the closed and marble-lidded eyes; nose and chin stood out in their perfect modelling, white against the browner tint of his folded arm; the lips were beautifully folded together and red with the warmth of sleep. From his throat the nightshirt had been pushed away and lay also open on his breast. Arm and neck were tanned a little by his constant rowing in the sun, the breast revealed by the open linen was snow-white and smooth as her own.

Hilda stood and gazed, and her eyes travelled over the splendid form lying in its easy gracious pose beneath the quilt. A feeling of reverence stole over her. What right had she to bring her turbulent passions, her stormy grief and black hatred into this room where all was that quiet peace for ever now, it seemed, denied to her? She had half turned to go, noiselessly, abashed, like one who retreats when

he finds he stands on sacred ground, when Clive moved suddenly, opened his large dark eyes, which filled immediately with warm lustrous light as they fell upon her, and instantly sat up.

"Hilda dearest, do you want anything?"

Hilda stood rooted to the spot, the uncertain colour flying all over her face, her lips trembling.

How gloriously handsome he looked, how full of warmest sympathy, affection and love for her. She tried to answer, but could not find her voice. She tottered to a chair beside the bed, there sat down, and suddenly burst into tears.

"Oh, Clive, I am so unhappy."

"Unhappy? Can I do anything? Oh, don't cry like that. Tell me what is the matter."

He slipped out of bed as he spoke without any embarrassment, for where there is no sense of sex there is no shame and no confusion; thrust two very well-shaped and ivory-white feet into his slippers, drew on a dark silk dressing-gown, and then came up to her chair and took one of her hands in his.

"You have not been to bed at all?" he said in surprise, looking down at the lovely vision she made in her rose-coloured evening gown, with the diamonds and pearls gleaming on her neck and in her hair.

"No, I couldn't. I have been walking up and down my room, and at last I felt so dreadful I had to come to you."

"I am so glad you did. Your hands are so cold; you are shivering. Come and sit in this arm-chair while I make a cup of tea for you, and then you shall tell me what is worrying you."

He put a wool scarf of his own round her shoulders and got her to sit in a large arm-chair. Then he lighted his spirit lamp on a side table and busied himself with making tea for her. Hilda had stifled her sobs in her handkerchief. She leant back now and watched him; reaction was setting in after the fury of the past hours; she felt cold, weak, tired, numb, and it was nice to be received and waited on like this.

When he had made and brought her the tea he sat down opposite her and watched her drink it with affectionate interest. Then he said earnestly:

"It is as I thought, Hilda, isn't it? You wanted to go to Egypt with Roland. You didn't want to marry me at all; I felt that. It was wrong of me ever to do what the doctor told me. I asked you, and then you were forced into it, and now you are unhappy with me. Can't you go to Roland now? I would rather die than see you unhappy."

The tears welled up again to her sore wet lids. This was love without passion. Hitherto she had only known passion without love.

"Dear, dear Clive," she said gently; "you are the dearest, kindest boy, and it's absolutely no fault

of yours. The fault is mine, and that of my horrible family. I hate them all."

"But what shall we do?" persisted Clive. "You cannot stay here to be unhappy. Can't you join Roland now?"

"No! no! because, you see, Roland does not *want* me!" and a fresh burst of agonised tears broke from her. "He thinks he would have to give up his regiment, his career, if I went to him. He cares for them more than for me. He thinks, too, I should not be content if I lost my position. He is crazy on that point; he thinks a person's social position compensates them for everything."

She spoke on mechanically, not thinking really that Clive would follow what she said, but Clive could follow everything which was in the way of a logical proposition or argument. Intellectually, as it were, his brain was perfect, as you may say a clever boy's is, only, as in the case of a boy, the sexual, emotional capacity, which is the key to so much in life, was not yet developed. He understood, however, Hilda's words now perfectly.

"Roland would have married you if he had not had that wife at Longhurst?"

"Oh, yes."

"It was terrible that you should have married me just on the very day that she died and he was free."

"That is what I feel."



"But can't our marriage be undone, can't I set you free, Hilda? There is nothing I would not do to help you."

"It could possibly, I think," she answered hesitatingly; "but Roland thought it would take time and . . . and . . . there might be some scandal about it." Her face was scarlet now. She could not tell him the truth, that Roland feared their child might be born before the legal matters were settled and he had had the opportunity to make her his wife.

Clive came over to her, knelt by her side, put his arms round her and pressed his lips to her cheek.

"If you stay here with me I will try to make you very happy. You are like a golden cloud. Can't we have a happy life together?"

To the girl who had never known a man's kiss without passion, had never known a brother or a father, this sudden close contact with a beautiful young male being, who loved without desiring her, opened a world of new sensation. As she felt his arms round her waist and his fresh young lips against her cheek new thoughts, new ideas, new visions, new hopes rushed in upon her. She was softened, touched and soothed, inexplicably comforted. She put her arms round his neck and let his dark head rest for a moment on her bosom.

"We will try," she said in his ear, and Clive looked up joyfully.

"We will have a jolly time," he said enthusias-

tically; "if you can only not worry too much about it all. Where are you going now?" he exclaimed as she made an effort to rise.

"Back to my room that you may go to sleep. It was selfish of me to wake you up at all."

Clive laughed his clear light laugh.

"Oh, don't do that. I don't want to go to sleep now. Look, it's broad daylight nearly. You sit still where you are and let me read you some Homer. If you go to your own room you'll get mopey again I know, because at Longhurst I was alone so much and it made me miserable."

Hilda sat still in the chair, a little smile coming to her pale lips. It was such a quaint cure for sleepless sorrow to sit and hear Homer read in the night. But she did not actively resist. She sat back in her chair with his scarf round her shoulders, and Clive got his volume down from the shelf, settled himself in his chair opposite her and began to read.

Greek is a wonderful language to listen to when well read, and to some ears like music. Hilda listened now with pleasure, the intellectual capacity, which was as great as her capacity for passion, waking up again in her. Clive had a beautiful voice; it had not yet the tenor beauty of sex in it, but it had the pure flute-like quality of the choir boy, musical and perfect. Later, if it ever had the other tones, it would be irresistible.

He read easily, fluently, and Hilda listened to the

doings of the long-haired Greeks, their great feasting on the shore, the roasting of the whole oxen, the winged words spoken above the roar of the resounding sea, and admired the reader and his voice; and so the night wore away, and at last the sunshine and the song of birds flowed in upon them from the window.

Clive laid down his book.

"I say, I am jolly hungry now. What do you say to breakfast?"

Hilda rose. "Thank you so much, Clive. I will change and get dressed as quickly as I can, and you do the same. Then we'll go down to breakfast."

"You are better now?" he asked, anxiously looking at her as she passed him to the door. His face had wonderful beauty at the moment, fresh in the morning light as the morning itself, and with the flush and fire of his reading still upon it.

"Yes, dear," she answered, smiling back at him. Then she passed out and to her room, where she went up to her image in the mirror facing her and looked at herself, pale and tear-stained, and with the light falling harshly on the dress and jewels of the evening.

So that had been her wedding night! How different from the real wedding night when her soul had seemed to fly upward on its wings of fiery delight, when her senses and her brain had been ablaze with passionate joy, under the silver moonlight and the cadences of the wonderful calling bells of Como.

## CHAPTER X

THE days that followed were those of a mild, wet winter, rainy, soft, neutral-tinted, grey, succeeded by those of a warm and early spring, and all the agony and passion of Hilda's feelings sank — and subsided slowly into an even calmness, which had something of numbness and something of real tranquillity in it, under the influence of the beauty and peace of her surroundings.

At twenty-two, in the spring, when the cuckoo is calling everywhere on the sunlit hills and the night-ingales are practising their first notes in the thickets, when all nature is uprising and rejoicing, when the days are lengthening out their golden light and the sunsets pour fire into the blood, it is not very easy to be wholly unhappy, however painful the circumstances; and Hilda's circumstances now were not painful. An outsider, looking into her life, would have said they were perfect, and to herself she admitted that there was nothing wanted in her life but the presence of Roland and his passionate love.

She found herself sole mistress of this beautiful, spacious flower-filled house, set in grounds which delighted her with their varying glades and dells, their

copces, their velvet lawns, their slopes of closely massed trees. Her will was supreme. There was no other to clash with it or to which she need sacrifice her own or for the sake of which she need pause a single instant before she gratified her own wish or impulse.

She had with her a companion whose health and grace and beauty hourly delighted her vision and satisfied all her keen æsthetic sense, and whose intellect was on a par with her own, so that both could soar together in the realms of thought far beyond the limits of their home.

She had the motor, the splendid motor Roland had given her, and to take her seat beside Clive in it, and to see him let it fly forward at its full speed, yet perfectly under his control and obedient to the touch of his hand, to let it take them tearing through space hour after hour, by green woods and ways, under dancing skies of blue and white or flaming skies of red, seemed to move her with joy almost equal to the joy of passion. She enjoyed those drives with a fierce glad joy, the first to which her stunned heart responded, and then from that recovery to its normal powers she began also to enjoy her life.

Clive was delightful; to a nature naturally unselfish he united all the courtesy and consideration, the refinement of manner, thought and bearing that goes generally with his high breeding and the

old name he bore; and Hilda, who had revolted from the ways and views of her own family, and who therefore had never known the ties of affection, began to feel the warm glow of it in her heart for him.

From the first moment of her consenting to marry him she had resolved to do the very best, to exert herself to the very utmost to cure him, that she might not have the odious feeling that she was taking advantage of a helpless man, sheltering herself behind his name and position, making use of his want of knowledge and inability to grasp the situation, for her own ends. If, by his marriage with her, he recovered his full reason, if she helped him to that, she would have made him a glorious return for all she had received. Her debt would be paid in full.

That this might result in disaster to herself, that it was hardly in accord with Roland's views, did not deter her; she felt she could not accept the position of wife to Clive on any other terms. When she had thrown away the doctor's drugs, when she had warned Roland as to the future, she had openly taken this stand. And Roland had not urged her to do otherwise. He had not supported the doctor nor condemned her action. In his own heart he did not wish Clive to recover, but he would not have taken any means to stop his doing so nor urged them upon Hilda. He believed the doctor's theory, that recovery was impossible, and was quite willing that

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Hilda should satisfy her conscience and sense of honour in trying to effect what was beyond her powers.

Hilda herself at first only had this instinct and this intention, because the honour of her nature forced them upon her. As a matter of duty she intended to make her marriage benefit Clive, but after only a few weeks of intimate companionship with him this intention grew into a deep personal wish, an absorbing interest for her. He was so handsome, his physique so perfect, his intellect in some ways so brilliant that she longed to give to him the one more ray of light that was needed.

It was a great interest, but at the same time, as yet, an entirely detached and impersonal one; only akin to that longing in all humanity after perfection. She had the same feeling with regard to Clive that nearly every man has on looking at a beautiful statue which has an arm missing—a longing to replace it; or on passing a perfect garden and seeing one corner of it neglected—a longing to bring it up to the standard of the rest. And the fact that Clive improved marvellously after leaving Longhurst gave her great encouragement.

Freed from the depressing influence of surrounding invalids, freed also from the sense of being under orders and bound to obey, for Hilda consulted him in everything—referred to him in everything,

though she had no need to, for the decision always rested with her; placed in the closest companionship with an educated and extremely well-trained mind, above all, in an atmosphere of tranquil happiness where nothing jarred upon him or distressed him, his mind expanded rapidly, his manner gained assurance, his cheeks colour, he held himself finely and talked gaily and responsively.

"I feel so much better than I did at Longhurst," he said one day to Hilda, as he was just guiding their great white motor through the park gates with a firm and skilful hand. "The doctor was awfully good, but I think he gave me too many drugs, too many injections; I used to feel so awfully bad after them—not just after, but in a little while. I am much better now that I don't take them. This life with you is so splendid, you can't think how different I feel in it;" and he looked down on her as she sat beside him with such grateful, tender warmth in his gaze, that it called the blood to her cheek as she glanced up at him.

"I am so very, very glad," she murmured, and as the car toiled along gently through the village the old women and the young women with children in their arms, and the old men with bent backs, and the young stalwart ones, all alike looked after them and felt the same as the old crone who voiced the common thought: "Lord, they do be a fine pair,



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and the young gentleman he be mighty handsome, and she do look just as sweet as she can be. Bless 'em both."

So, as often happens in life, these months that Hilda had fancied would prove so intolerable as to drive her to her grave, rolled smoothly, even happily, over her head. She did not cease to think of Roland and long after his presence, his voice, his commanding, selfish, yet in many ways charming domination over her, but her physical condition prevented that longing being the ardent one she had known in earlier days; and mentally she had been so bruised and wounded by him in their last interview, when he had shown her so plainly that other things and considerations in his life ranked above her, that the mental part of her love for him also was dulled and blunted.

When his first letter came to her, addressed Mrs. Talbot, a trembling seized all her limbs, her face grew scarlet and white by turns; she hardly dared open it, for Clive was sitting at the other side of the table and had said carelessly:

"Is that a letter from Roland? How is he getting on?"

With a great effort which she felt to be due to both the men, she regained her composure and opened the letter and read aloud:

"DEAR HILDA,

"I send just a few lines that you may know we have

arrived here safely, but in a horrible sandstorm, howling wind raging outside, and indoors shutters shut, and dust and darkness. We are in the new quarters at Abbasieh and not very comfortable. I hope you are well and find the house suits you. Be out all you can, and *walk*; don't give up walking for motoring. I hope to hear from you — soon.

ROLAND."

She laid the letter down. She *knew* he must write like that, formally. How could he do anything else? Yet it seemed as if another strand of the frayed tie that bound her to him had given way under that curt, cold note, and the letter she had opened with such uncertain fingers, she tore to pieces with firm, untrembling ones, and put the scraps with other torn-up papers in the fire.

Clive and she were inseparable. In the mornings they generally read Greek together, or wrote letters, or she played while he sat and listened to her. After lunch they usually took the motor and made a long run with it, taking their tea out at the prettiest spot they could find, and returning to dinner. After dinner they sat over their coffee, talking, discussing, theorising, suggesting possible translations of difficult passages in their morning reading, or, if it were fine, they would stroll out — beneath the may trees or lilac in the still, fragrant air.

They only parted at night with a warm kiss, and their rooms were side by side, with but one wall between them.

The event now to which Hilda looked forward and longed to have arrived and be over was the birth of her child. She had a nervous sense of embarrassment with Clive. When would he notice the alteration in her looks? and what would he say? how would he think of it? She felt so nervous with anticipation that sometimes she felt she must begin the subject herself, but then such a shaking came over her heart, such a trembling to her lips, she felt she could not utter a word. She went on concealing the fact as long as she could. Her health was apparently not affected, and she dressed with the utmost care. But nature pays no attention to trembling girls and their private wishes, and at the end of the fourth month from the wedding the housekeeper respectfully referred to the approaching birth in a matter-of-fact way, that showed Hilda Clive could not be kept in ignorance much longer, if indeed he were not ignorant already. And two days afterwards, when they were alone in the evening, Clive himself said to her, very gently:

"Hilda, you dress so differently now; you look different. What does it mean?"

So it had come, the inevitable question, and Hilda raised her head proudly, steeling herself to the trial as well as she could, and answered calmly, though her face paled to a white marble tint.

"It means I am going to have a child. You know, Clive, married people do."

How she hated herself for the fraud upon him, as she met his frank, ingenuous, trusting gaze. But she *had to*, she had to go on with it now. And then came the thought, why had Roland forced her into this lying deceit? why had he spoiled and trampled on all the poetry and beauty of their love?

Clive said nothing at all, but after a few moments' gaze on her, looked away in silence to the fire burning redly on the hearth. Hilda wished he would speak, say something, give her a clue to his thoughts, but he remained silent, and she wondered wildly what was passing behind the broad white forehead that had so much tranquil beauty beneath the dark hair. But it was just the combative, enquiring impulse that Clive's brain lacked. Hilda had announced a fact to him, had said it was a usual and to be expected fact, and that settled it. He was accustomed to accept all she said; to doubt, to enquire about it, was to him impossible. But he did feel this. There was something he did not understand, something that was beyond him. He felt it was there, but he could not grasp it; it eluded him, and lately there had come up so little in his life that he could not grasp that he had almost forgotten he was not normal, as other men were, and this knowledge, now brought home to him, saddened him.

For some months nothing that Hilda had said to him had been puzzling, incomprehensible as this was.

A child was coming, Hilda said, and because they were married. He understood that, but there was a blank somewhere.

A boy of eight or ten, told that his mother was going to have a child, would have received the news just as Clive did. The boy understands a brother or sister is to be added to the family party. How or why such an event comes about he does not know, and he *does not seek to know*; that is the curious part of the undeveloped brain. The boy knows he does not understand, but he does not enquire. Without understanding, without enquiring, he accepts that which is impossible for the developed brain to do.

That Clive did not understand was a bad symptom of his state, but that he did not enquire, did not seek to understand, was one infinitely worse. Hilda knew this, none better, and on any other subject in the world she would have drawn him on, if possible, to question and to learn. As it was, she took refuge in the abyss of his silence, and felt relieved that he asked no more. She did so hate to lie to him, to mislead, to trick him in any way.

However, the brain develops through other channels than intellectual employment, and emotion is one of the best awakeners. The next day his emotions, and a mere accident, led Clive far along the road to complete reason. He went by chance for a stroll alone, as Hilda had a letter to finish, and, coming up through the village, he was suddenly

stopped by a garrulous old gossip, who stepped up to him in the middle of an empty by-street and began pouring out her troubles.

"If you could be so kind, sir, as to give me a trifle towards my daughter's burial I'd be thankful to you, sir, I would indeed. Poor thing, she had an awful confinement."

"What is that?" enquired Clive simply. The old woman peered at him curiously out of her red-lidded eyes.

"Eh, dearie me, a young gentleman like you don't know much of these things. Well, sir, my daughter as was, poor thing, she was going to have a child, and she suffered dreadful. There she lies two days a-groaning and a-groaning fit to break your heart, and the doctor he can't do nothin', and she says to me, 'Mother, for Gaud's sake let me die,' and after them two days and nights, she did die, sure enough, poor girl, but she's left the baby, and it's hard on us wot's got to keep it, for she warn't married, sir, my daughter, begging yer pardon for mentioning it; but there, you has a good heart, sir, and you knows what it is for a poor girl."

Here the old lady stopped to wipe her eyes and peer furtively out of them to see if her story was likely to have a good effect — financially — upon her listener. She was a little surprised at what she did see. Clive was staring at her with pained eyes and a blanched face.

"Is it always like that?" he asked, after a moment's horrified gaze. "Is that what having a child is?"

The old woman shook her head doubtfully. She did not quite see the bearing his question might have on the donation she hoped for, but it seemed best to continue the picture in its blackest tones, and not to spoil the impression she had evidently succeeded in making.

"Well, sir, it do be a bad business for us women, that's sure enough. Very, very bad."

"But not many die, surely?" faltered Clive, with white lips.

Again the old crone shook her head. "Ah, sir, there's a many that die that way, but I say, ah, well! it's a lot harder for them wot's left behind to pay the burial expenses."

By this time Clive had drawn a sovereign out of his pocket and pressed it into the old creature's outstretched hand.

"I am very sorry indeed for you, Mrs. Green. I will speak to my wife about you, and we will see how we can help you."

"Thank 'ee, sir, kindly; I be mortal obliged to 'ee," exclaimed the delighted recipient, nearly overcome at this generous result of her eloquence; "and you'll forgive my mentioning it to you as perhaps I shouldn't, seeing your own poor lady is along on the same road; but there, Gaud works mysterious

like, as the clergyman do say, and perhaps he won't cut her off in the flower of her sins, so to speak. God bless you and thank you, sir, kindly."

Most of this was mumbled after Clive as he walked swiftly up the road. He was horribly torn with anxiety, terrified by doubts. Was all this before Hilda? Did she know it? Had she known it when she had spoken to him so quietly last night? She knew everything. She must have known all this. Was she in danger of death? Hilda, his bright golden cloud! What did it all mean? Why should she have a child? Because she was married, she had said, but then this other girl he had just heard of, the old woman had said she wasn't married.

With his heart racked in pain, and his brain in a horrible chaos, in which the desire to know, the beginning of all wisdom, was struggling, he hurried back to the house and came upon Hilda sitting cool and lovely on the lawn waiting for him.

Clive had great self-command where it was needed, and he did not rush at her with hasty words as the boy, whom he in some respects, but not all, resembled, might have done, but drawing up a chair beside her, he sat down and said very gently:

"I have just had a great shock, a great grief. I am afraid you must have thought me very indifferent last night when you told me about the child. I had no idea there was any danger about it."

Hilda looked up in alarm at his first words, then



continued gazing at him as he sat beside her. There seemed suddenly an older air about him, and how handsome he was in his light grey suit, with the shadow of his straw hat falling on his face, so grave and serious in its calm as he looked at her.

"I was talking with Mrs. Green just now. She was telling me all about her daughter. Have you heard?" he asked.

Hilda nodded.

"How stupid of her to worry you! Yes, I have heard all about it."

Clive bent forward. "And is it true, then? Oh, Hilda, don't tell me that you have to suffer all that, that your life is in danger."

Hilda stretched out her hand and clasped his with a smile. There was real agony in his face.

"Dearest, no! There is danger, of course, but no more than when we go out in a motor-car! There is suffering, but it may only last an hour or so. That poor girl was an exception. She was specially unfortunate. I am not afraid, and neither must you be."

The tension in his face lessened, but did not disappear.

"I do hate to think you have to suffer through *me*; that it is because you *married me*. I can't bear it."

Hilda bent her head down with sudden anguish. These were the coals of fire, and they burnt.

"It might have been just the same, Clive, anyway, if I had not married you," she said, in a stifled voice.

The gong summoned them to the house for luncheon, and no more was said, but the whole impression on Clive was deep and lasting, and from that hour his tenderness and solicitude for Hilda knew no bounds. He seemed hardly able to bear her away from him for a moment, and waited upon her, cared for her, gazed upon her, with devoted affection.

So the time wore away, and the summer gently advanced upon them, and at last one evening Hilda, who had looked blanched and wide-eyed all day, came up to Clive, who had been sitting reading aloud to her, and said simply:

"Dearest, I must go to my room now. Telephone to the doctor to come, will you? And whatever you hear in the night, do not be disturbed or distressed. I am sure it will be all right, and when it is over I will ask you to come to me at once."

Clive sprang to his feet, distress, pain and alarm all vivid in his face.

"Oh, can't I stay with you, be with you, watch over you, if you are going to suffer? Do let me!"

Hilda shook her head and forced a smile, as she looked up to the eager countenance bent over her.

"No, it's quite impossible. It is better for me that you should not be with me."

Clive said no more. He dropped her hand and went out to the telephone. The nurse was already in the house, and took charge of Hilda as soon as she got upstairs, and the doctor arrived soon after, in hasty response to the tearing message he had received. Then Clive went to his own room next Hilda's and sat down there with the door half open.

In a few minutes the butler appeared.

"Dinner's quite ready, sir," he said in subdued tones. Clive stared at him.

"Dinner? Oh, I could not take any dinner to-night. Tell the cook she needn't send it up. Say I am sorry, but I don't need any. You can send the coffee up here when you have it ready."

The butler turned away and closed the door softly, shaking his head. He was a married man, and Maria had done her duty towards the population, quietly and efficiently.

"Lor'," he thought now to himself, recalling the set expression of Clive's face. "Gentlefolks *do* make a fuss about things! Just fancy me going without my dinner when Maria's taken bad."

Clive sat in his room, one elbow leaning on his writing-table and his head leaning on his hand. No sound came from the adjoining room. The house was well built and the walls thick, so that all ordinary sounds and movements would not be heard through them. One hour passed, and then the servant reappeared with the coffee. Clive had not

moved from his position. When the man had set the tray on the table and gone, he got up, poured himself out some coffee and drank it, and then resumed his former attitude. Not a sound disturbed the silence of the house.

On the other side of the wall Hilda lay in mute agony, sometimes pressing the linen in a great fold across her mouth, lest any sound should escape her, and the doctor bending over her, said:

"Cry out if you want to; it will do you good. It's a relief. You're straining yourself more by keeping quiet."

Hilda shook her head.

"Clive is in the next room," she gasped. "He must not hear anything."

"Well, I'll go and tell him he must go downstairs and sleep on the sofa. I'll tell him you must be free to scream if you please."

He spoke jokingly, but Hilda's face lighted up with anger, and she stopped him imperiously from going to the door.

"I won't have you go. Clive will not *sleep* anywhere to-night, but I won't have him know what I suffer."

She could say no more, but the doctor subsided, and through all the night of anguish she preserved a tortured silence, and Clive, wide-open-eyed and with beating heart, heard nothing. At dawn there was a tap at the door, and the nurse entered, placid

and smiling. Clive sprang to his feet, pale and with large terrified eyes fixed upon her. His lips were dry; they moved, but he could not, after that long tension of waiting, articulate.

"It's all right, sir. It's a nice little boy, and the lady is doing first rate and would like to see you."

Clive went forward with one joyous bound, and the next instant he was in Hilda's room and bending over her as she lay back, very, very white, it seemed to him, on the not whiter pillows. She smiled up at him as he stooped down and kissed her.

"It's all splendid, dearest," she whispered. "Now do go and sleep. You must be so worn out. I am quite well, quite content. There is nothing for you to worry about."

Clive, looking at her, did not feel entirely convinced about that, but he was accustomed to accept all she said without replying. He looked round. "Can I see it?" he asked. He felt a burning curiosity about this child, this part of Hilda, this other life. The nurse came forward with her arms, it seemed, full of white wraps. She lifted one, and disclosed to Clive a dark red, tiny, struggling object. Clive was bewildered. He had expected something white and golden like Hilda.

"There's your son, sir," said the nurse proudly; "and a fine, strong, healthy little man he is too."

Clive gazed upon the child in silence. Then he

turned again to the mother, but Hilda's eyes had closed. Her whole appearance suggested to him intense, unutterable fatigue. He nodded silently to the nurse, and then noiselessly withdrew and went downstairs into the cool light morning. He was infinitely relieved, overjoyed and supremely thankful. Hilda had not died like the villager's daughter. His bright golden cloud was with him still.

## CHAPTER XI

THE next morning a telegram came from Roland, and after Clive had seen it contained nothing distressing it was brought to Hilda as she lay in bed, already looking restored and happy. It ran: "How are you all? I hope quite well. Wire.—ROLAND."

"What a strange coincidence he should wire just now, when you have been going through so much. I suppose he has had no news of you for a long time."

A deep flush burnt all over Hilda's face, new fire and light seemed to flash in her eyes. The date of the wire was just nine months from the silver night at Como. So he had not forgotten. Perhaps an intolerable anxiety about her had prompted that telegram. Perhaps for weeks, months past he had been thinking anxiously about her, suffering for her. A great tide of love and passion rose from the innermost depths of her being and flowed through her towards this man to whom she belonged by every natural right and tie. His image swam before her, and her heart rose, calling, calling to it. If she could but have willed him into the room at the moment,

drawn his shape and substance from the formless air! She would have laid down her life in those moments to have felt once more his clasp and kiss. Como and all its scenes of deadly beauty rose before her. Again she was in that shaded fragrant room, again he stood before her, vivid, impetuous, commanding, selfish; yet even in that supreme selfishness of passion there is an irresistible attraction for a woman. The intensity of the man's desire makes her sacrifice worth while. There is a charm that perhaps only female nature can know in being wanted excessively; a flattery, an intoxication, a maddening incense to their vanity that enchants all their physical instincts and forces them to succumb.

Hilda had never in her innermost thought reproached Roland for Como, for all he had done to obtain her, for the position he had virtually forced upon her, for that intense desire which had led him to completely sacrifice her. She was at his feet, and glad to be there; glad to be sacrificed, glad to suffer for and through him. It was only his wanting her less that she resented; less than his life in the world; less than his career; less than his regiment. That was the wound and the hurt. All else was more than a hundredfold forgiven.

And now those words flashed over a wire written by his hand but an hour or two since, how they appealed to her. Those illuminating words, how they rushed through every cell of her brain, through the



desolate passages of her memory, calling to her numbed and sleeping love for him to awake.

Their nights of love! How picture after picture of him and her and that splendid, wild, irresponsible passion, that madness of delight, swept by in flame before her mental vision. And her child and his, the tangible proof of that adoring love she had had for him, lay beside her.

Oh, for that last month before its birth, how she had longed for Roland! To have him for whom she was suffering beside her, to have Roland, the one who knew all, the one who understood, and to whom she could not merely speak, but to whom her heart stood always open, so that speech concerning things was hardly necessary, so evenly and perfectly did the electric currents of thought pass between them.

How she had felt her banishment from him, her isolation! Clive had been good and dear, but what companionship can a child offer to the suffering, passionate, adult brain of a woman? She had felt horribly alone, unutterably deserted, shut out from even the consolation of sending to or hearing from him intimate and understanding letters.

But now suddenly the electric current was set up between them again. It seemed to her she saw him, felt him still living, still caring for her. He had not forgotten.

All this passing through her mind was so reflected in her face, in flashing changing expression, that

Clive, sitting by the bed, waiting to know what answer she would wish sent to the wire, watched her with interest.

"You would like to send an answer, I suppose?" he said at last.

"Oh, yes," she answered quickly. "I think we must. What shall we say? Suppose you just send this: 'Hilda had a son yesterday. Both are going on well'; and then sign it 'Clive.' Will that do? He will like to hear."

Clive wrote down exactly what she had said on the telegraph form without comment and signed it. "I will give this to James, then, and see he goes off with it at once," he said, and left the room.

Hilda, alone, held the sheet of paper to her lips and then to her bosom, crossing both arms over it and pressing it into her flesh in a passion of delight.

A fortnight passed, and Hilda continued making an even rapid recovery. The machinery of all that perfectly-planned-out body was as excellent as its modelling. Lithe and supple and strong, full of her fresh young life and health, she gained with every hour, and all went forward smoothly, harmoniously, as Nature first intended these things should go, before her plans were defaced and made crooked by the follies and vices of man.

Hilda nursed her child herself; she was well able to do so, and it gave her an infinite joy; it seemed something else that she could do for Roland. The

slight physical discomfort that it was to her, for her nerves were so sensitive that there was discomfort, only added to her mental joy. She was carried back to the past when all her body belonged to him and she had been subservient to his will. She loved the child simply because it was his, a manifestation of their love, a part of him; and as she embraced it and cuddled it to her, she hoped it would resemble him, recall his bearing, his ways, his wonderful distinction.

Clive was goodness itself to her in all this time. Her room was always full of flowers that he had chosen himself; he read to her, sat with her, wrote letters for her; came to her in the hours of the night, oppressed with the fear that the nurse might be inattentive or neglectful. Hilda recognised all this and was grateful, but in that time the star of Clive waned.

It could not stand the triumphant blaze of passion that the advent of the child had caused. Clive sank again to the status of the dear younger brother, while in those long months of waiting, before the birth, and before Roland's message, while the desires of the flesh were stilled, he had imperceptibly become something more—an influence of power in her life.

The child grew quickly, and was full of superb health and vitality. It never cried, still less screamed or wailed or kicked, red-faced in horrible convulsions,

after the manner of less healthy babies. It only chuckled and grew fat in its velvet skin, and slept and drew life from Hilda's breast in solemn contentment. At the end of the fortnight a small box came by post from Egypt, and when opened by Hilda with uncertain fingers was found to contain a gold christening cup, set round the lip with a beautiful design of the vine, carried out in small amethysts and emeralds. The purple cluster of the fruit shone in amethyst amongst the emeralds forming the leaves.

Hilda set it before her on the bed and gazed at it with hands pressed together in a violent sensation of joy. Her dress, her dress, the colour she had worn on that enchanting night from which the child's life had sprung. How well he had remembered! He had not forgotten anything. She heard Clive's praise and admiration of the cup as in a dream. Her mind had flown back suddenly to its first owner.

That night she lay wide awake thinking of the name she should give the child, and because of the great happiness that had made its being, she decided his first name should be Felix. She wanted so much that one of his names should commemorate as long as he lived those wonderful Como days, but she hardly dared to call him Como, as she would have liked. Then, as she turned the matter over in her mind, the name of the hotel, the Plinius, rushed into her mind. She could call him Plinius. For her, a constant classic reader, whose volume of Pliny was so

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frequently in her hand, it would seem nothing unusual. So the name stood Felix Plinius, and then she tossed about, for she wanted the dear name of the lake associated somehow for ever with her son, and at last decided upon Morcambe as containing all the letters of the word. Then came the name of Roland, and with that she took the warm scrap of life into her arms and fell tranquilly asleep.

In the morning she consulted Clive, and as he had no objection the child was christened Felix Plinius Morcambe Roland.

At the end of the month, on the first day that she came downstairs, looking radiant and curiously full of life and fire, she wrote a letter to Roland which she did not show to Clive. He never asked to see her letters, so that she sealed this one up, and when they went for a short drive in the afternoon she stopped at the village post office and slipped it into the box herself.

Through the days that followed she hardly thought of anything else than his answer. What would he say? Would he arrange anything so that they could be together? At nights she could not sleep, but tossed to and fro, writing in her head a thousand different possible replies that might come from him.

It was the first letter of the sort she had sent him since Como. She had acknowledged the cup before, and thanked him enthusiastically for it, but Clive

had read the letter, and it was couched in merely friendly terms. This was the first glimpse of her heart that he had seen since their parting; her first appeal to him against the lot he had cast for her. She longed for him so much now in that first rebound after her illness; in that coming back to joyous life. She would have liked to be with him, to rejoice his senses with her brightness and her beauty, to add pleasure and delight to his life.

Before the birth of the child she had been content to be alone; to suffer away from him. She had longed for him then to console her, comfort and support her; but her naturally unselfish instincts made her resigned to being without him while she felt it was only for herself she needed him. But now she was well, bright, fair to look upon again, and could give *him* pleasure, all her leaping nature within her rose up and ardently desired to go to him.

How would he answer her? she wondered, and thought, and waited, and hoped, in joyous anticipation.

## CHAPTER XII

THE khamsin, the hot damp wind of Egypt, was blowing in its own wild relentless way across the officers' quarters at Abbasieh; the palms in the gardens rocked and swayed in it, as it tossed them to and fro; the sky was of dull copper, and in it hung a pale blue disk, sometimes seen between and sometimes hidden by the great copper-coloured clouds that rolled like ocean billows through the sky. Dust was everywhere, stinging, biting, clinging red dust that covered everything, and raced in little whirling eddies down the deserted road. Every building had its jilmils tightly closed, its doors shut, and still the dust raced and poured and drove and filtered through every chink, till the mattings on the floors within were gritty and everything one touched rough with rasping sand.

To Roland, sitting in one of these close-shut, darkened, stifling buildings, alone in his fine suite of upper rooms, came Hilda's letter; and he rose from his table, covered over with letters and official papers, and threw himself into one of his long cane lounging chairs.

When he had broken the seal and read the first

few lines, a look of annoyance gathered on his face, and he sat up with a sudden movement and exclamation of impatience.

"Why will she be so unwise as to write such letters?" he muttered to himself, and read on frowning.

"MY DARLING,

"I want you so very much. Do come back to me. Can't you get leave and come? Or can't *your sister* invite me to stay with *her* for a time, as at Como? Oh, how happy I was there, Roland, and you, too; you haven't forgotten, have you? I know you have not, because of the exquisite cup you sent, and the colours in it. Do let us have that delight again. The child is just one month old, and I am perfectly well. I never felt so well, I think, in my life. After all that suffering and being rather ill for so many months, a great reaction seems to have set in. I am so well now and I look so nice; that is why I want to come to you! Clive is immensely good and has improved since you saw him, but he does not understand love any better, and we are living just as relations would. He is very fond of me, and would let me come on a visit to you if I asked him, or if you can come here we can be very happy here. I am going to change my room, and I shall occupy the large one under the end gable; it is so sunny and nice for the baby. Do try and arrange something so that we can meet *now* or *soon*. I have never loved you, I think, as I do just at this moment, and perhaps I shall never have the power again to love you so much. I seem to



see you every instant, and cannot sleep at nights for thinking of you and longing for you. It seems so sad that hour after hour, day after day, has to go by without you. My very dearest, my life, let me come to you, or come to me.

“HILDA.”

Roland was still frowning blackly when he came to the end of the letter. It seemed to him so foolish for a married woman to write such a letter. Suppose it were seen? Once such a letter is written, no one can tell where it may go. If he were ill some malicious person might find it in his rooms and send it back to Clive, or spread the contents about, or make who knew what use of it! Hilda was so unwise. She never hesitated to compromise herself. He really felt very angry with her. As to her suggestions, he could not accept any of them at that time. He certainly could not get leave, nor go to England just then. Of course it would be delightful if she were there with him, but he did not suppose she could leave the child, and for the two to come would excite talk and comment; especially in her case, as she was so likely in looks and actions to reveal her love for him. As now, for instance, to write these compromising notes to him, which if found would be far more compromising if the writer were living in and known in Cairo than away in England.

No, he did not really see that anything could be done till he was ready to go back. How often do

men try vainly to warehouse a woman's love against their return!

Roland's life in Egypt at that time was very full of work and interest. He had many schemes for the betterment of the conditions of the troops in Egypt, and his whole heart was in his profession.

He had also been greatly fêted and courted that season, and spent a thoroughly enjoyable winter, and though the season was over now, all its gaiety, its late hours, its dancing, its dinners had left a very pleasant impression, mingled with a sort of fatigue. He felt ready to settle down to a stretch of work and get things in first-rate order for next year.

Women had been very kind indeed to him, and though he had not been with one who for a moment roused the feelings which Hilda had, still there they had been flattering, courting, caressing him, lessening a little that sharp hunger for its mate that the human animal feels when cut off from it, and when there is *no other mate in sight*.

There was no other woman at all like Hilda; in his estimation there was no other so interesting; but that there were heaps of other women of every sort and kind was a fact that was brought home to Roland and ground in upon his perceptions every day. And some of these were very pretty, and others were very kind, and some were both, and altogether Roland's life was not at all unsupportable. Camel rides through the desert by moonlight with the beautiful

wife of some poor industrious devil who was up the Nile were interesting, especially when the beauty offered her curved lips to him to kiss in the shadow of the Pyramid. Afternoon teas at his own quarters, where married ladies came during their supposed shopping excursions in Cairo, whiled away many pleasant hours, followed by evenings which stretched on to the daylight, of dancing with them clasped in his arms. More often, therefore, the visions that floated round him when he finally stretched himself exhausted on his hard military camp-bed were those of the last white throat he had kissed, of the last pair of red lips that had joked with him over the lie they were going to tell their husband, than of Hilda's blue eyes and gleaming hair. To do Roland justice, he did not seek these things, and the callous heartlessness, the lying habits, the hypocrisy and utter want of honour of the women repelled him to such an extent that sometimes he professed absence from his quarters, when in reality he was there, behind doors locked against them. He did not ask for favours, but they were forced upon him; good-looking, distinguished, attractive, alone, the women flocked round him, and became suppliants to him in a way that was often embarrassing and annoying.

No one in that wild whirl of gaiety seemed to care about anything except the amusement of the

moment. To dress, to dance, to drink, to love, to make the most of the time, that was the only idea running through the whole of the society; and in order to do all this it was quite natural and allowable to lie, to cheat, to trick, to gamble, to steal, to do anything at all, only not to be fool enough to be found out.

Therefore, in this kind of existence, where his senses were gratified to the utmost, and real love, honour and all kindred things habitually made mock of, the memory of Hilda had far less hold on him than if he had been alone with his thoughts on a desert island.

He had been very anxious about her till he had heard of the birth of the child, and just at that period he had had many nights without sleep on her account, but now hearing she was well, entirely recovered, and also that Clive showed no signs of becoming in any way inconvenient, Roland's anxiety was soothed, and it seemed to him in every way best that she should remain where she was. Had she written that Clive had recovered instead of herself he would have felt very differently.

There are three ways of stirring a man's passions: through his jealousy, through his senses, and through his brain. The last is by far the most difficult, as the first is the most easy. And as Hilda's letter was too artless to stir his jealousy, and could not move

his senses, but could only appeal to his memory and his brain, a man's two weakest points, it was very natural it should fail.

Roland got up from his chair, found a pen and wrote a reply at once. Then he struck a match, and holding her letter by one corner set it alight. It only took a few seconds to reduce it to ashes. The flame curled up and scorched his hand a little as it burnt out the last words, but he soon forgot it in the interest of drawing up the plan for the new barracks to which he turned his attention.

About seven days later Hilda was sitting at Whitfield, in the drawing-room, and any artist looking into the room would have been inspired to paint her as the Spirit of Summer. She looked so cool, so lovely, so fresh and pure and young, and yet with the warmth of summer in her cheek and eye, and the full richness of summer in her breast that rose and fell beneath her white lace gown. It was late afternoon and she had ordered tea, and was waiting for Clive to come in to it. The room was full of shade from lowered blinds, and the light there was seemed to come in green and mellow, reflected from the emerald lawn beyond the long windows. She was at the moment idle, but even as she sat there with her hands clasped behind her golden head, she looked full of potential energy. Her lips were so bright and full, the glance of her eye so swift; even her hair did not lie flat and

languid on her head, but was full of little wavelets and kinks and curls.

How the June air called to her, how her blood 'danced along her veins; she was full of life and vitality, like those swift, perfect-winged swallows that swept in their rapid flight, screaming with joy and excitement, across the gardens. Oh free and happy swallows! she thought, watching them go by in their light aerial passage. Free to go forth in the sunlight and seek and find their mate, and wing with him through space, while she, poor cramped human being, must sit and wait and hope that dry words written on poor helpless paper would bring her mate to her.

To her in this mood the servant came in suddenly with a letter, and Hilda sprang up and took it, recognising instantly Roland's writing on it. She broke it open joyously, and read:

"DEAR HILDA,

"I have your letter of May 30th. I write at once to tell you that it is quite impossible for me to get leave and come over, or for you to visit Egypt at the present time. I doubt if, as you say, you would find the change benefit you. The climate is intolerably hot just now, and will get worse up till next October or even later. Do be reasonable and try to find satisfaction in your present circumstances. They cannot as yet be altered, and if you yourself feel so well that is surely a great

thing. I am too busy to write more just now. If you wish to please me try to remember *scripta manent*.

"Yours sincerely,

"ROLAND."

Hilda read this through swiftly and then folded it mechanically and put it back into its envelope, and took a few steps to the window, where she stood looking out. So that was his answer to her passionate cry to him. He did not *care* what she suffered. How extraordinary men were, she thought, in their incapacity to realise mental pain. While she had been physically ill and in bodily danger he had evidently thought of and remembered her. To her longing for him to return, which was a far greater suffering than any she had gone through in the birth of her child, he was apparently quite indifferent.

She knew the letter already by heart, but one sentence had burnt deeper into her brain than all the rest: "Try to find satisfaction in your present circumstances." So that was what he wished and thought so advisable! A little smile curled round her lips. If Clive recovered perhaps she might. Perhaps some day Roland might regret the order he had given. Her love for him had received a blow she felt it could never recover from. To her the letter seemed so unnecessary, so hard and brutal, and utterly callous. Never, never again should he have an appeal from her; never again need he be troubled by the undue warmth of her letters. In fact,

unless of necessity, she thought she would never take up her pen to write to him again.

Satisfaction in her present circumstances! The words seemed written across the blue sky as she followed the happy swallows in their flying. Well, she would try, as he so complacently suggested. Henceforth the doors of her thoughts, of her heart, of her brain should be closed to him. She would rivet all her attention on Clive; hope and pray and work still harder for his cure, and centre all her loving, poetic fancies, all her wishes and desires on him.

It is not every woman who would have felt as she did. Many, perhaps most, would have sat and cried over Roland's letter for an hour and then got up and written an effusively reproachful answer, but she was different. Intensely grateful for love and kindness, intensively responsive to it, she felt an equal degree of resentment when hurt and wounded. For those who, like her, love through and with their brain, the greater part of love lies in the idealisation of the lover; in that golden web of fancies and ideas they weave round him, in the concentration of all their imaginings and fairy illusions on him.

Tender and faithful as she was by nature, her mind clung to Roland whether he were absent or present, and she dwelt on him and kept his image before her, painted in the most lovely colours. But this could only be while he desired her love. If it were not wanted by him, she would take it and the



golden web and coloured fancies from him, and never give them back.

Clive, who had been upstairs changing a dusty garden coat for one more fitted to Hilda's society, was surprised when he came in at her soft, smiling greeting. She was always dear and sweet and kind to him, but lately she had seemed so abstracted, her eyes so far away, that he had felt strangely outside her life. This afternoon she was different, delightfully different; her spirit seemed present in that beautiful body of hers; her eyes were so bright and they looked at him with so much interest. As they sat at tea together she said:

"Let us take the motor and go for quite a long spin, shall we? Away, away into the green woods, and come back late to a cold supper instead of dinner. Would you like that?"

And Clive, who always liked what she liked, answered, "Immensely."

They finished their tea, gave the necessary orders, and a little after five they started. It was a glorious evening; everything seemed drawn and painted and modelled in gold; the air was still and radiant, glowing with rich topaz-coloured light.

Clive felt very happy as he let the motor fly forward, with Hilda seated close beside him. She had put on a small white hat, which he particularly admired, and felt no grudge against as it was completely turned up on the side next him and let him

see the masses of soft fair hair it rested upon, and a single pink rose nestling amongst them. Her cheek was pink too, and the blue eyes looked very bright beneath the dark lashes. When he turned to look at her she looked back at him and laughed gaily, letting him see her milky teeth gleam between the parting red lips, and Clive felt his heart beat with a sudden new sense of gladness and joy in mere existence.

So like two gleeful children they sped onward through the summer evening. After two hours' run they had reached the border of the New Forest, and determined to turn into and run through it, so inviting did the smooth roads look under lofty aisles of arching beeches. Clive slackened the pace of the motor and they went quite slowly here, just tooling along listening to the song of the chaffinch and gazing into the green wonder and glory of the wood pressing close up to the road on each side.

Suddenly the sound of music other than birds' voices came to them, and then laughter and talk from out of the sylvan quiet of the scene. Hilda bent forward.

"Some people are dancing there in the open," she said. "Let's go up this broad green drive and see what they are doing."

Clive carefully turned the motor off the hard main road on to the short velvet turf of one of those broad, green, grassy drives, bordered by bracken and over-

arched by the delicate foliage of the beeches that are the greatest beauty of the New Forest.

The car went along easily and silently on the level emerald road, and so they came unannounced on the villagers' scene of revelry. Under a wide circle of huge beeches that rose all round like stately columns supporting the green roof of leaves and branches above, where the ground was naturally smooth and level, a cloth had been tightly stretched, and here in the open village girls and working men were dancing together to the music that four concertinas and a violin gave out for them. It was a pretty scene in the mellow sunlight pouring through the green of the curtain-like foliage; a scene slightly spoiled by the common little shack that had been run up at one side for the sale of ginger-beer and nuts, and by the rough wooden benches near it; by the common appearance of the poorly dressed and rather tipsy-looking musicians; by the awkward, uncouth figures and modern labouring dress of the men dancing. But the setting was lovely enough to have enclosed a dance of the Bacchantes, or a circle of Greek maidens, tripping lightly to the silver flute of Pan. And the girls here were pretty enough; neatly dressed with short white skirts and white or coloured blouses, dancing mostly without their hats, and letting the sun glint down on their young faces and fair or chestnut hair.

Hilda laid her hand on Clive's arm. "Stop here,"

she whispered; "let's watch them for a minute."

Clive brought the car gently to a stop at the mouth of the broad green alley-way, and the villagers looked across and gave a friendly smile when they saw the gentlefolks had stopped to look on. They were all very jolly, having drunk much ginger and other beer at the stall, and inclined to be amiable, especially as Clive lifted his hat in a general salutation, with his distinguished air, and Hilda smiled radiantly upon them.

The musicians changed the air and played quite a pretty waltz, and the couples danced to it gaily. Near where the motor was drawn up stood one of the rough benches, and on it alone sat a village girl of about eighteen. Her hair was dark, with many brilliant shades in it of red and gold as the sunbeams struck across it; her large grey eyes looked like clear pools of light in her pale well-formed face. Hilda gazed at her in silence for a minute or two and then pointed her out to Clive.

"She has no partner and she's quite pretty. Ask her to have a dance with you. Would you like to?"

Clive looked back at her with amused eyes. "I would much rather dance with you, Hilda," he said.

"I am a little afraid to dance so soon, otherwise I would directly," she answered; "but I should love to see you dance; do, to please me."

Clive laughed and prepared to get out of the

motor. "We used to dance a lot at Longhurst. Every Friday we had a small dance; some of the inmates were very good dancers. I am sorry you can't take a turn with me."

He descended from the car and went up to the girl, who started and blushed as she saw the handsome stranger come towards her. She smiled beamingly when he asked her to dance, and looked nervously first at Hilda and then at one of the burly fellows amongst the dancers. Seeing, however, Hilda smiling on her and her lover engaged in pulling his partner round the ring, she overcame her scruples and Clive slipped his arm round her and glided with her into the centre of the dancers.

Clive danced perfectly, and Hilda sat upright in the car watching him with tense interest. He had a good ear for music, which is the first necessity for dancing, and all the athletics which the doctor had so insisted on gave to his body and all his muscles a wonderful pliability and elasticity. The simple country waltz ground out by the concertinas was a thing of beauty, danced as he danced it, and Hilda watched every movement with delighted close attention. He enjoyed it, evidently; he was so strong and well and supple and full of life, mere movement was a joy to him. Gradually all the other couples were wearied out and sank one by one on to the surrounding benches, but these two danced on, and the "band," not liking to stop since the gentleman

seemed to appreciate their efforts so well, and this appreciation might translate itself into tips for them, played on at their loudest and hardest. Dancing was no fatigue to Clive since he was a perfect master of the science of it, besides having the spring of the deer in all his muscles; while the girl, never in her life having had such a partner, thought she was suddenly in heaven and wished the dance might go on for ever. It was like dancing with the wind, so lightly did his feet touch the ground, his arm supported her so completely yet hardly grasped or constrained her, and whenever she dared to look up to him instead of over his shoulder, she saw such a handsome face, wonderfully cool and refined-looking in the green light under the trees, that her heart beat far harder than the dancing made it.

As they passed the car Hilda looked on with strange emotions. She saw all the ease and grace and beauty of Clive's movements, and noted the transfigured face of the girl looking up to him. She guessed what she was thinking, what passionate pleasure was being poured into the simple little untutored heart of the village girl at the mere contact with him; what a perfect, marvellous being he appeared to her, and what unending happiness must be the lot of his bride.

Hilda clasped her hands suddenly together in her lap as she murmured to herself, "And he is mine!" All this that another would have deemed herself so

blest to have possessed was hers. Had she any right to be unhappy, to neglect this gift that life had given her? Simultaneously Roland's words flashed across her, "Try to find satisfaction in your present circumstances," and she smiled as the girl and Clive came round again. Clive, cool, distinguished, with his air of well-bred indifference, the girl flushed, smiling, all in a flutter of beatific sensations. Yes, if . . . if . . . if . . . if only Clive should awake, then . . . perhaps . . . that satisfaction would not be so difficult to find. The rustics looked on at movements they both did and did not understand, with their own peculiar, dull, apathetic interest. They understood the rhythm of them, for some were good dancers themselves; but the grace and lightness, the ease which comes from constantly doing a thing, and always and only in its best manner, was new to them.

At last Clive, noticing they were the last couple, stopped and led the girl back to the bucolic swain she indicated was her particular property. He looked a little surly and ill at ease as the young gentleman approached him, but Clive's charming smile and easy sang-froid was not to be resisted. He said how much he had enjoyed the dance, and complimented the man on his fiancée's beautiful dancing in such a quiet, natural, courteous way that the coarse shining face of the farmer's man soon relaxed into a broad grin of

pleasure. Then he crossed to the somewhat exhausted band and revived its energies by a handsome tip, and rejoined Hilda in the car.

The band struck up again lustily, and as the motor backed slowly down the green alley all fell to dancing again, this time a lively polka. Hilda's eyes watched the girl who had been Clive's partner. She would not join in the dance, but sat down as before on the bench near them, and fixed her great grey eyes on the retreating car. Their steady longing gaze never left it till green meeting boughs of the beeches overhead came between and hid the figures in it. Hilda sat silent as the car backed on to the hard road again and then flew forward through the forest; she was thinking of the girl's sad haunting eyes and their last longing look after Clive.

She was very much stirred, and all her thoughts seemed flying about in her head at different angles. Now one and now another idea, often wholly diverse, flashed across her. She had been deeply, horribly, cruelly pained by Roland's letter, but every now and then it came to her that this pain she felt was very good for her. It would help her to banish Roland from her thoughts, and it seemed to her banish him she must. She did not feel that she could ever lead the life of deceit he had sketched out for her. It had always seemed impossible, and now, after months of life beside Clive, with the warm affection she had for



him glowing in her breast, and joined to gratitude and many other subtle emotions, it seemed more impossible still.

No; in that month after the birth of the child her passion for Roland had risen like a great wave, strong to overpower everything. Torn in agonised longing for him, she had cried instinctively to him for help, as Christian martyrs might have cried for pity in the flames, and had he responded to it she might have gone then, leaving Clive finally. But he had thrust all her pain and passion back upon itself, and she saw clearly, as one sees sometimes objects in the dark suddenly lit up by a flash of lightning, that the only thing he had to offer was the double life she so hated. She was to live with Clive, maintain her position as Clive's wife before the world, and be at his disposition secretly whenever it suited him, but not necessarily when it suited her. The cold facts were brutal, and many women would have evaded them and tried to veil them to themselves, so horribly did facing them hurt. But Hilda had a very clear, strong, virile mind in that breast of exquisite female softness, and she gazed straight at the facts of life habitually, because so it seemed to her could one best direct one's course. This position that Roland tacitly offered she felt she could not accept and never fill. While he was alone, a poor, solitary prisoner, chained to a woman who neither wanted him nor even knew she was his wife, it seemed to Hilda a simple matter

to go to him, to sacrifice herself to him, to give up all for him, in order to be with him.

But to deceive one who loved and trusted her, and with whom she lived, was another and impossible thing. That was why she had so vehemently rebelled against the marriage; she had realised it was the death of her relations with Roland; but not even then had that realisation been so vivid and so clear as it seemed now in the light of Roland's words. It was over; it must be so; it was at an end. The days and nights of Como were over for ever, and it seemed to her as if a violent physical pain tore and raged in her breast as she said this to herself. Yet she did say it again and again, as the Roman Lucretia forced the sword with brave hands into her own heart. And in the midst of all her suffering she recognised this, that the pain of this ending, this parting, was now not so overwhelming as it would have been earlier. Already Time was pressing with soft fingers the edges of gaping wounds together, and in the other hand was it not holding out new gifts?

She glanced upwards from under white long-lashed lids at Clive sitting beside her. The golden light had died down on earth, and in the sky a soft warm rosy dusk was replacing it, and in this the pale, clear outlines of Clive's face stood out in beautiful repose as he sat guiding with quiet intentness the swift race of the machine.

So mile after mile was traversed, and the sweet

fragrant air rushed past them, and the light sank and sank, leaving them to the mysterious violet darkness of a summer night. Far off, low down in the east, the moon rose over the rim of the world, and a pale light began to diffuse itself slowly round them, while still the great motor raced on with noiseless wheels.

As she sat there silently beside him a realisation came over her of what their drive would be if Clive's arms came round her; if those dark eyes looked down upon her full of the same fire that had glowed in Roland's; if he asked her to kiss him, knowing the inner meaning of a kiss! Would she not be happy in giving him that kiss? She thought so, and an inexpressible longing came over her that he should ask her; she looked again and again at him, but Clive sat like a statue, serious, calm, absorbed in the passion of driving, in the delight of motion created by his own hand.

Hilda too held herself like a statue, outwardly as still and cold, yet all within her heart seemed molten together in a furnace of excited pain, and all her veins seemed to have living fire running in them. In the intense reaction from Roland she felt she wanted consolation, someone to soothe and caress her. If Clive would but awake now, if he would clasp her to him and look down into her face with all written in his that she had once read in Roland's! She knew quite well that she had only to stretch out her hand

and lay it on Clive's arm, to turn to him and let him see the distress in her eyes, to say "kiss me," and he would instantly check the machine and take her in his arms and give her all the sympathy, all the same affectionate interest he had before.

But she would not do this. In the first place she wanted not to ask for kisses, but to have them demanded of her; in the next, it was not sympathy and affection but passion that she desired; and thirdly, the most powerful consideration of all, she was afraid, afraid for him. If, in her state of electric ardour, he took her into an affectionate embrace, might not suddenly all that innocent affection in him be turned into passion and desire, and before the brain had recovered enough to guide, direct and restrain it?

Then, if that should happen, if, as it were, his body should awake before his mind, from that wonderful sleep that now enfolded both, he might become, instead of the splendid human being she hoped, merely an erotic maniac.

This apprehension was always before her, had been with her from the very first, had been vivid to her mental vision on her marriage night, but had never gripped her with the same intensity as at this moment. So far she had tried by every means in her power to strengthen, improve, awake the brain, and that must be done first. The brain must awake to its full powers, reason must be reinstated on a throne that could not be shaken before any call was made

upon those physical instincts which can be either ministers of exquisite pleasure, or the bringers of ruin and horror, according to the brain that directs them.

No, she was determined that whatever she might have to suffer, whatever it might cost her, she would do only the very best for Clive's ultimate good that lay in her power. She could not tell, absolutely; the mysteries of any form of madness are so deep that no one can penetrate them. In her kiss he might awake fully; a look, a pressure of her lips on his, a call to his senses, might mean with the awakening of sex also a complete enlightenment of the brain; but if it did *not*, if sex alone, without reason, awoke, the result would be so disastrous, the ruin of all her hopes so complete, that the risk seemed too great to run.

Like one who approaches the furnaces beneath a fiery kiln and slams to the iron doors, shutting in all the red and golden and white flaming heat within, she shut to the heavy doors of an invincible control upon her heart, and held herself motionless; and so, like two silent bloodless ghosts in their white car, they travelled on swiftly, mile after mile, through the moonlit avenues of the forest.

### CHAPTER XIII

THE days went slowly on at Whitfield and gradually began to fill themselves with strange, struggling interests, hopes, expectations and desires, things which were apparently inseparable from Hilda's existence. For a time her life had seemed settling down into calm waters, but here it was again all breaking into rough billows of conflicting thoughts and wishes in her mind.

The child grew fat and pink and white, and its head now rested on the pillow, surrounded with a perfect halo of golden curls. When Hilda held it in her arms and nursed it, it was hard for her not to think of Roland, to remember the past, and grow sick with a sort of tumultuous longing for him. But the waves of this grew less and less as the time passed, and only little cold notes came from him at intervals, not such as would recall the passionate Roland she had loved. Moreover, the absolute impossibility of being his again was borne in upon her more and more. How could she be with Roland when all her time was devoted to Clive? They were inseparable; practically the whole day was passed in each other's companionship, and nothing but leaving

him and her child and her home, for a direct visit either to Roland, or to some Mrs. Howard, would set her free; and this, also, seemed impracticable. What would Clive do without her now, even if she could arrange to take her child with her? and how terrible the coming back would be if the going away were welcome.

But would she be glad to leave Clive now? she wondered, and it seemed to her the answer most often borne in upon her mind was No. She had begun to take an extraordinary interest in him, the more so that he was growing, developing, altering each day. With all young Englishmen a great change generally occurs between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-five. The unfinished form, the undecided look upon the face, the awkward uncertain air one sees at twenty-one is gone at twenty-five. The figure and carriage have become assured, the face has taken on a look of power and maturity. And this change, that turns an often uninteresting-looking youth into a handsome man, was infinitely more pronounced in Clive. Hilda's watchful attentive eyes saw with surprise and delight how really beautiful the always handsome face was growing, how the slight youthful figure was expanding, developing, how the air of force, decision and power was becoming apparent in all his movements and actions.

Looking at him sometimes shyly as they sat at their translations, which amused them both so much

for so many happy hours, a feeling of awe towards him came over her. He was so unconscious, like one of those perfect cold stone statues that line the Vatican walls. Would he ever wake up? and when? and what would happen when he did? She asked herself these questions more and more often, and could find no answer to them in her wildly beating heart. It seemed so strange to her to be there, so intensely alive with all her pulses warmly beating, and the blood streaming fast along her veins, and all her brain alight with the burning pictures of past passion, and he there beside her, wrapped in that impenetrable mental sleep which rendered him unknowing of it all.

The more his outward physique and his development became mature and like that of other men, the more curious this relationship seemed to each other. Within herself Hilda felt the full tide of youth and health and life brim up to her very lips, and there were moments during the long hours of their reading together when, like the gust of some wild wind, the longing came over her to throw her arms round him and say:

"Kiss me! I can't stand any longer this loneliness, this dulness. Life is not really this cold, cheerless, empty thing. Come and look at it through my eyes."

But she held the reins of her emotion tightly in. An unspeakable terror came over her sometimes at



the thought that possibly passion and physical strength would wake up in Clive before the brain, and this apprehension was sufficient to nerve her to the hourly sacrifice, the iron self-restraint that was necessary. She was not personally afraid. It was not in her nature to feel either physical or moral fear; she foresaw it was quite possible that Clive might, if the awakening came first in his senses, strangle or tear her to pieces in some frenzied embrace, but she hardly ever dwelt on that. Had it happened, the supreme agony of her dying moments would have been that she had failed in her self-imposed task, that he would now for ever be consigned to the horrors of madness from which she had lifted and had hoped to finally rescue him.

It was a severe test of self-control, a difficult life for a girl to support as she did absolutely alone, unsustained by any outside encouragement or counsel, unsupported except by an unerring instinct within her of what was wise and right.

She lived in practical isolation, but she accepted that gladly; it was better so. She had ceased to feel interest in her family; her sister had married and was duly installed at the much-coveted Clearbrook; her mother was staying with friends. The society in the neighbourhood of Whitfield was dull and countrified; she wanted no one, appealed to no one. Hand to hand alone she fought with Clive's malady, with her own memories and her own passions. One

day she thought she would test the improvement she hoped had been made. It was afternoon and Clive sat at the table reading; one hand supported his forehead, his elbow leaning on the table. Hilda had been sitting watching him from an arm-chair by the window. Strange pleasure coursed through her as she noted the easy grace of his attitude, the beautiful shape of the dark head resting on his hand.

"I belong to him," she repeated within herself; "he legally owns me and has every right over me, and he does not know it! How will he try to use them when he does?"

"Clive," she said suddenly. "Will you get up and kick that cat for me?" A beautiful Persian cat sat between them in a strip of sunlight, engrossed in licking its fur with its tiny rose-leaf tongue.

Hilda was so close to it that if Clive showed any intention of carrying out her order she could easily save it. But she hoped he would not; if the cure were advancing, as she hoped, he certainly would not. She chose purposely something which would offend his sense of right as a test. Had she asked him to do anything merely foolish or unreasonable Clive would probably have done it out of his love for her, and she would not then be any wiser as to how he regarded it. But this was different . . . she waited with her face paling and her heart beating to hear his reply.

Clive looked up at once from his book and turned

round to her. On his face was an expression of most intense surprise, but in the dark eyes she read anger and a cold indignation also.

"Hilda, what do you mean?" he said.

"Just what I told you. Will you do it?"

"Certainly not," he answered coldly. "It would be a beastly thing to do," and he took up his book again and recommenced his reading.

Hilda sprang from her chair; she could have sung and danced for joy. But she held herself very quietly and said gently, as she came up to him:

"You must have known I only asked you to see if you would refuse me, and I am so glad you did. You see how much better you are. At Longhurst you would have done it, perhaps?"

Clive looked up and gazed at her with meditative eyes. "I can't exactly remember how I was then, or what I should have done," he said; "but I hardly think Harrington or anyone could have got me to strike or injure an animal; instinctively one revolts from it; that is not so much a question of reason as of feeling."

Hilda let her eyes rest on him with a warm caressing light. Perhaps, as he said, her test was not a very decided one, but it was worth while to feel disappointment over that to obtain that glimpse down into the depths of his character.

The absolutely quiet life they lived in the seclusion of each other's society seemed to Hilda the best for

her object. If they had mixed much with others, if Clive had been in the company of older men and women, she could not have told what callous, cruel or degraded ideas and sentiments might be engrafted on a mind not properly equipped to resist them. As it was, she kept him continually in that atmosphere of elevated thought, of hard study, of the contemplation of beautiful things and beautiful ideas, that she loved and lived in herself.

He knew much of Pindar and Theocritus by heart, and Hilda set to music and arranged so that they could sing them together the little lyric odes of Anacreon. She never kept the subject of love away from him, only took infinite care that nothing mean or sordid or low should ever be connected with it. She put it before him as it had always been to herself, something exquisite, pure, divine; a gift to this world straight from the hands of the gods. They read those books chiefly in which it is so portrayed. So does the image of love and passion stand out in white light in the pages of Plato and the Attic dramatists, and these were constantly in his hands.

Amongst the later writers she chose out those for him in which there was depth and philosophical work, where the language was refined and the images beautiful, and filled a revolving bookcase in his room with the works of Milton, Victoria Cross and Bulwer Lytton.

Though Clive only vaguely understood much of

what he read, his mind lying so much on the surface of things without the ability to grasp their inner meaning, their deep and often terrible significance, still the mind, like the body, imbibes the atmosphere with which it is surrounded and forms tissue out of that atmosphere's constituents. And so, far from the noisy, grinding, sordid, contaminating world, surrounded by the beauty of thought and idea, by mental work, by music, by flowers, and the Arcadian landscape, Clive lived calmly beside her; and Hilda, restless, impatient, ardent, full of burning life and energy, wild with the longing to enjoy her youth and all the keen pleasures of life, stayed there and tended and watched over him.

One evening they were sitting late over their reading. It was the Eastern poem "Shakuntala" that lay before them, and the singing music of love that every page gives forth, the fragrance of lotus and bauble and jasmine that seem on the wings of its golden words to blow over the soul of the reader, broke down suddenly Hilda's self-control. With a sudden sob she laid her head down on the table and broke into a passion of tears.

Clive started up immediately and came to her, infinitely distressed. He tried to lift the golden head and to draw her into his arms, but Hilda felt she could not stand it. She must escape from him, and in loneliness and solitude, as so often before, win back her own empire over self. She rose, as one sees /

a wounded deer start to its feet to flee when the pursuer breaks through the thicket.

"Let me go, dearest; good night. I shall be better alone. You cannot help me."

She motioned him away from her and went to the door. Clive drew back and gave way as always, but she saw the distress on his face and smiled at him through her tears. "It is nothing, I am only tired," she said gently, and had disappeared before he could answer her.

Clive, left alone, did not return to his books. He walked up and down the room, his dark eyebrows drawn into one straight line across his usually tranquil brow. That he was the cause in some way of her tears he felt sure, and it filled him with melancholy and despair that he could not even understand them.

Hilda had gone to her own room under the gable, now a good distance from the one occupied by Clive. The child was sleeping in its little cradle there, and she choked down her passionate tearing sobs for fear of waking it. She sat down in one of the low chairs and pressed her handkerchief to her lips, tearing the thin lace on its edge in her teeth. She felt mad, exasperated by the quiet and calm, by the tranquillity, by the unconsciousness of Clive, by the little progress he seemed making, by the uncertainty of her position. She had received only that day a few lines from Roland saying he would soon be leaving Egypt, and

would come to her at once on his arrival in England; but it brought her no comfort now.

How could she leave Clive? She knew she could not, nor could she divide herself between the two. And yet suppose he never did recover? The doctor, Roland, everybody, had told her he would not. It was only on her own instincts that she was staking her hopes. If he never did, if he never did recover, she kept repeating to herself, could she go on with this life indefinitely? Could she find courage to resist Roland? to live cloistered like this in a peace and calm that was killing her? And yet to accept again now the excitement of Roland's love seemed impossible. Before, in her eyes, it had been innocent, but now it would be evil, injuring and betraying Clive, and it was his eyes now that she longed to light up for her; it was his love she desired. That would come to her free and pure and fresh as hers for Roland once had been.

Suddenly in the silence a little sound stirred, the door opened softly. She looked up. Clive himself stood there and then crossed the threshold. Instantly ice seemed to close round her; she was afraid — for him. How splendid he looked, with his fine carriage and his beautifully cut face, with a little pallor on it now from distress, and the dark eyes concerned and tender.

Her whole soul seemed to rush out to him, to call to his soul to come from its mysterious wanderings)

and meet her own. But she checked herself; held down her arms that she so longed to stretch out to him.

"What is it?" she said, rising.

"I came, Hilda, to ask you to let me stay here with you," he said, advancing to her. "You cry and you feel miserable, partly because you insist on going away from me at night, and being all those hours alone. Why do you do it? You are happy enough in the day with me. Come and put your head on my breast and sleep in my arms, and you will cease to feel so unhappy."

The girl trembled in every fibre. The temptation pressed upon her with a knife-like edge to throw herself into his arms and let his passions catch fire from hers, as indeed she foresaw might easily happen. Her eyes took in with ecstasy the lines of his face, the waves of dark hair, the clearness of the smooth skin, and all her physical pulse beat, and a longing seemed to sweep over her and bend her to him, as a great wind sweeps over a trembling tree. But of what avail is the beauty of eye and skin and line without the soul? After all, the wild call of love is to the soul and brain. To win and conquer that, to know the divine fire of the spirit is his own, is the real desire of the lover. If his arms were round her and his lips on hers, if the passions of the flesh burnt through them both, would it satisfy her? would it be any use at all while his soul still wandered in exile?



And not thus, not through the flesh can the soul be reached.

Aloof, alone in its silence, the soul will only listen to the voice of a kindred soul calling to it. With the cries and the needs of the flesh it has nothing to do. The barren and empty and meaningless delight of the senses alone would never satisfy her, even if it could be hers without risk and danger to him. Only in the finding and in the victory over that far distant spirit could the triumph of love be hers, and for that infinite patience and strength were still necessary.

"Clive," she said, and to him, as to Roland, her voice seemed like the sound of the south wind, "dearest, it is impossible; I must be alone. Leave me."

He hesitated, uncertain, reluctant to obey her, but his will was not yet strong enough to resist the pressure of a will like hers when she chose to exert it, and that she was doing now, so that the force of it came upon him in great electric waves, driving him back towards the door. He said nothing, the power of speech seemed taken from him. Silently he withdrew as she had commanded him. Hilda, left alone, stood for a minute in her place, then suddenly sank down to the floor in a passion of suffocating sobs.

## CHAPTER XIV

It was a hot night at the end of September, and the large windows of the Whitfield drawing-room stood open to the soft warmth of the outside air.

Hilda sat by one of them, looking out, watching the white night moths gleam against the violet darkness beyond, as they circled in their fairy flights in the light shed from the windows.

On the other side of the room, in one of the deep arm-chairs, lay Clive fast asleep. They had been out for a long gallop over the open country and he had said he felt tired when he came in, an unusual thing for him, since he rarely expressed bodily or mental fatigue over anything.

After dressing for dinner and dining they had gone as customary to the drawing-room for their coffee, and while waiting for it Clive had dropped asleep. Hilda thought lately his nights had not been so good; his calm boyish slumber was a thing of the past, and this, like many other signs of his awakening brain, brought strange tremors to her heart of mingled fear and pleasure. She had been anxious not to disturb him now and had crept quietly over to the window. It was more than a year since the silver night at Como; she was not thinking of Como now,

and lately her thoughts had strayed less and less in that direction. The great hand of the past was over all that, and had gathered it to itself.

About a week ago she had had a note from Roland saying he was on his way back and would come to see her immediately on reaching England, but it had hardly moved her at all. She was not thinking of it now. She was thinking of Clive, and how with each day lately there had been some little indefinable change in him that might have easily escaped careless eyes, but not hers. Some of these changes had not made their life easier, happier or lighter; quite the reverse, but they carried to Hilda a strange instinctive joy, a pulsing interest in their daily existence which was well worth the free, light-hearted companionship it had replaced. Clive seemed older, graver, more serious and cold, sometimes constrained and embarrassed in circumstances where he had formerly been gaily unconscious. His voice had attained a beautiful tenor quality, so moving to Hilda that sometimes now when he read to her aloud she could not stand it and would beg him to stop — she had a headache, she felt too nervous to listen, or some similar excuse would make Clive close the book, and she would shut her eyes and press both hands over her heart to control its beating. She was thinking over all this now and realising how intensely dear he had become to her, when Clive suddenly started in his chair and sat up.

"Hilda!" he said, looking round and seeing her sitting by the window.

She rose at once and came over to him.

"Yes, dear."

Clive stretched out his arms to her with a joyous expression.

"Look at me! Don't I look different to-night?"

Hilda smiled down upon him.

"You look very nice and handsome, Clive, as you always do."

"No, but look in my eyes. Are they not different? I feel different. It seems as if someone had lifted a veil off my brain. The past seems rather blurry and misty, but I feel I can tackle things now and understand them. Hilda, you are my wife, are you not?"

Hilda's face paled to a deathly whiteness; she trembled all through her limbs. Not for a moment did she deceive herself. The time she had thought over, expected, half dreaded, at first genuinely and latterly with a terrified joy, had come. Clive was sane. There was no mistaking the clear authoritative accent on that question; the tone, the voice, the expression on his face; the suddenly steady, commanding look in the eyes. She caught hold of a chair rail by her to steady herself, and forced her white lips to say in answer:

"Yes; we have been married eleven months."

"And I have been stupidly half asleep all that time! What a sin when I was married to you!"

He got up and stretched himself with a sense of delight and power.

"What a grand sensation this is, this sense of light and clearness in the brain. I have had glimpses of it lately, but now I feel it has come to stay. It's glorious — but, Hilda ——" He approached her, and Hilda, feeling her limbs would no longer sustain her, sank into the chair.

"If I have been so bad as I must have been ever since we were married, what a wretched time you must have had!"

He was close beside her, and she felt oppressed to a point where she could hardly breathe. How handsome he was now that the glorious lamp of intellect had flashed up suddenly to its full power. The glance, the look of the man; what a force it had, what meaning it gave to the hitherto empty beauty of the boy!

She did not dare to look at him. Her eyes were on the ground as she said in a suffocated voice:

"No, we have been happy."

"There is so much I can't understand," he said, passing his hand over his forehead; "but it will all get clear. My brain is so different now from what it was. . . . Tell me, the boy? is it our child? is it mine?"

Hilda clasped her hands together desperately in her lap. In those moments she would have given up life itself could she have been the innocent wife free to

throw herself into his arms; if she could have blotted out the memory of Como, of Roland — obliterated it all. Once she had prayed her memory might never lose its grip on that wonderful picture of joy and love. Now, if she could, she would have erased it in her own blood. As a criminal before him she felt compelled to answer. Yet how she hated those lies she had to utter! Formerly she had loathed herself when she had met his boyish look of trusting acceptance of all she said. How much worse now to face those keen, too keen, eyes of the man!

"Of course it is our child," she answered in a low tone.

Clive broke into a happy laugh.

"I must have been mad if I cannot remember the wonder and glory of your love. But that is all over, darling! darling! the future shall make amends for it all. I am sane enough now."

He bent over her, and Hilda, a prey to so many varying emotions, felt held in an absolute silence. Both hands clutched at the chair sides, she crouched down on it like a small bird as the shadow of the hawk falls on it. A sudden fear and anguish gripped Clive as she did not answer.

"Hilda, you are not sorry I have recovered," he exclaimed. "Tell me you are glad. Oh, if you knew the delight of getting free from that sense of obscurity and ignorance that clung round me! Say that you rejoice with me, that you are glad."

"I am glad, very glad, only it all seems so strange, so new. . . ."

"It horrifies me to think that you have been mine all this time and I have not been able to realise it; but I do now, and it's the crowning joy of everything. You are mine, my own; you, the dear, glorious, golden thing I have seen moving about me as if in a dream. You are *my wife*. Oh, Hilda, what immense happiness for a man to wake up to! I think it is my love for you that has cured me. It has been struggling and struggling within me to express itself, and now it has broken all the chains that were round me and set me free. You are exquisite! I have always loved the sight of you, but I never realised that you were *mine*.

"Darling." And he sank on his knees by her chair and put his arms round her. "You are glad that you belong to me, and that I am no longer a dead log, but alive and ready to claim you? You *do* love me . . . from all you have told me, you must. . . ."

Hilda was silent still. It seemed as if her voice was gone. Clive rose to his feet.

"Perhaps you are tired out with loving such an unresponsive wretch as I must have been, but all that is over for ever. You will find me so different. I want your love now, crave for it. Get up — kiss me."

Hilda with an effort struggled to her feet.

"Of course I will kiss you," she said, smiling faintly. "I have often done so."

"But not as you will now," he answered, and caught her to him suddenly and kissed her passionately on her lips. In that kiss he conquered. As at the sign of the cross demons were supposed to flee and vanish, so did that kiss seem to dispel the wraiths and influence of the past. He claimed her and she was his. She put both arms round his neck and kissed him back, fervently, ardently, so that a joyous flame of fresh life seemed to run through them both.

"Oh, Clive," she murmured. "You have recovered! I hoped so much you would."

He held her to him closely. His golden cloud! the mystic loveliness he had worshipped was his, his very own. It intoxicated him. "Darling, darling," was all he answered, and neither felt able to speak nor move from that close-locked embrace, so great was the electric current set up between them, and so strong are its stupendous invisible bands. Utterly lost in each other, and both in that flood of satisfaction and delight sweeping over them, they did not notice beyond the open window a man's figure cross the lawn and then pause suddenly in the light.

The man looked in, watching them intently for a few seconds, then passed on into the shade. A minute or two later the sound of the coffee tray being put down outside, and the door opening, made Clive



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set Hilda free, and she sank down on the couch as the servant entered.

"Colonel West, madam," he announced, and so without any further preparation Roland walked in upon them.

Hilda's heart beat to suffocation; a mist seemed to gather before her eyes, through which she could only see dimly the lines of the familiar face and figure. They were the same, but they did not move her as formerly. She only felt conscious of regret that he had come, of anxiety that he should leave. Regret! and she had once so exhausted herself with longing for him. She rose and went forward, outwardly quite calm. Roland put out his hand and clasped hers a moment in silence, and she remembered his clasp of her hand on her wedding day; how it had rejoiced and thrilled her. Now over the gulf of eleven months it only hurt and oppressed her. Clive was just behind his wife.

"How do you do, Talbot?" Roland said easily, shaking hands. "You remember me all right, I expect."

"Yes, I remember you very well," Clive said slowly. "You came to Longhurst . . . and you were at the wedding."

"Yes, and I was a friend of your wife long before she met you. In fact, I look upon myself as a sort of godfather to her, and so I came to see her directly I arrived. We only got back yesterday."

"Sit down, won't you?" said Clive, pushing forward a chair, and Hilda took her place at the table where the man had set the coffee and ordered another cup to be brought. When the servant had gone out Clive turned to Roland enthusiastically.

"You could not have found us at a happier moment! Colonel, you left me the typical idiot-boy I expect, but since then I have shaken the vile thing off. I am in my right senses again now. I was only telling Hilda the moment before you came in what a wonderful thing it was, what a glorious thing to feel your brain is in the right place, that you've picked up the reins of your being, and you can drive the chariot of your own life without having to wait for others to tell you where you should go."

Roland had recognised directly the change in Clive when he had first come forward to meet him; he saw what these eleven months had done for him, and it did not need Clive's words to explain matters. One glance at him had told the elder man all — and more — than he wanted to know. He looked down into his coffee cup which Hilda had handed him and stirred his coffee.

"You've made a wonderful recovery evidently; I congratulate you."

"I believe I owe it all to Hilda," Clive continued. "Who could live beside an angel and remain mad? You see, at Longhurst, shut up with a lot of idiots like myself, it was so different. Of course, the doctor

was very good, but I couldn't always be with him, and there was no other brain to try one's own against; but always being with sane people and talking with Hilda has helped me so. All her ideas, all her suggestions to me have been so fine and good. They say you can catch insanity; you can get insane by living with a maniac. Perhaps you can get sane by living with the sane. It seems I have, anyhow," he finished with a laugh, and drank up his coffee.

"It must be a delight to your wife to feel she has cured you," Roland said quietly, looking across at Hilda.

"I have had nothing to do with it," she said, as quietly. "He woke up suddenly from a short sleep this evening and told me he was sane."

"Oh, but it was coming gradually, the change to reason. The constant talks to you woke up the brain, and the child helped too. Do you know, Colonel, that was the first beginning of my recovery, I think, when I saw the boy and heard it was my child."

Roland set the cup down beside him on the table with a sudden sharp movement and got up.

"What are you getting up for?" asked Clive. "Wouldn't you like to smoke? I've got some first-rate cigarettes in the library. I'll go and fetch them. I won't be a second. I'll have another cup of coffee, Hilda, please."

He went out of the room, and these two who once

had been so much to each other were left alone. Roland crossed to her and stood by her chair. She looked up at him.

"You see what it has come to, Roland? This is just what I always thought would happen. He is quite sane now, and it is all so dreadful."

"Do you find his love so dreadful?" asked Roland bitterly. "When I passed the window just now you seemed to be getting on very well indeed!"

"You saw us? Roland, you must be reasonable. He is my husband, and he realises it now. He entreated me to kiss him and congratulate him on his recovery. How could I refuse?"

Roland bent over her. "Hilda, are you the same as when I left you?" he asked, very earnestly. "Do you love me as much as ever?"

She looked up as earnestly. She wanted to put the truth before him; she knew it must be uttered, but she could not hurt him, could not be unkind to him.

"All is quite changed from what it was. Why did you not come when I begged you? I have grown to care for Clive. I would rather you left me to him now."

She saw a great darkness gather on his face; the lines of it seemed to set as if in stone.

"How can you ask me to do that? I have not changed. I came to you the moment I could. I came to spend to-night with you."

Hilda moved away from him.

"It's too late. You should have come before. It's impossible."

"Why? You told me in your letter you occupied separate wings of the house."

"Everything was different until this evening. Now he is awake, wild with love for me. In a way he is madder now than he was before. You know what a madness love is. I cannot tell what he will demand, what he will do."

Roland laughed slightly. "He cannot keep me from my own! Are you afraid of him?"

"Not for myself, but frightfully for you. If he suspected anything, if he found you with me, I think he would kill you. Promise me at least for this evening you will go. You will say and do nothing to excite him, and promise me that you will not come back at least to-night. We must think, we must devise something."

"I will promise not to return to-night if you will promise me also that you will remain alone."

He spoke meaningly as he looked down at her, and his eyes were full of fire. Hilda saw that his jealousy was thoroughly alight and all the worst elements of passion. She felt the sense of danger as when one looks over the crumbling edge of the volcano to the flames within. She hesitated before she answered, and Roland noted with fury that hesitation. She knew what Clive would ask of her, and

how difficult it would be to refuse. Still, she supposed she could do so, must do so, for Roland must not come there to endanger his own life or that of Clive for her sake. The two men must be kept apart, and any difficulty, any sacrifice, was not too great to secure this.

"I promise," she said steadily, and met his eyes in a clear straight gaze.

Roland walked away from her and reseated himself just as Clive re-entered with the cigarettes.

"Sorry to have been so long," he remarked; "but I couldn't find the box anywhere at first. I think you'll find these very good. Try one." He offered the box to Roland, who took a cigarette from it.

"I think I won't smoke it here. I will keep it to enjoy on the way back. I mustn't stay up late to-night; I feel rather knocked to pieces altogether. We had a detestable crossing to Brindisi."

"Oh, you don't want to go yet, do you?" remonstrated Clive. "I feel I want to talk to you. I am so grateful to you because you practically arranged my marriage with Hilda. I remember you were present at all the talks with the doctor. It seems so strange that you should have come back just this very evening I have recovered."

"Yes, I arrived just in time, it seems."

"Yes, just in time to see the commencement of the new order of things, the beginning of our real married life. We have had none yet. Don't you think we

ought to go away for a honeymoon somewhere?" He laughed and looked across to Hilda.

"No, I think we had better stay here," she answered constrainedly. A mortal fear was upon her; not for herself; of herself she never thought, but for these two who loved her and whom she also loved. She guessed that every word of joyous assurance that fell from Clive's handsome, smiling lips poured oil into the frightful flaming abyss of the other man's thoughts.

Clive turned to Roland. "Of course there is so much I don't understand," he continued seriously. "I see that there must be so much that I can't remember, but what puzzles me most of all is why Hilda married me in the state I was. Suppose I had not got well? Suppose I had remained like that? What a terrible life for her! I don't see how her people could have allowed it."

"I always felt you would recover, Clive. I told Roland and the doctor that you would," Hilda said quietly.

"And you undertook to make your prophecy come true? It was a brave, splendid thing to do, wasn't it, Colonel? I suppose the doctor thought I should recover?"

"The doctor said you would not," replied Roland.

"Oh, Hilda was wiser! He did not recognise what a woman's love can do! It's better than all his old treatments at Longhurst." He closed his hand

over Hilda's and gazed at her admiringly. "And I never can thank you enough, Colonel, for giving me all this great happiness. You must have believed in my sanity all along, or you would never have helped me to marry her as you did. In fact, you gave me Hilda. It was at your place that I met her first."

Roland rose from his seat. Hilda did not look at him. She knew well the agony, the jealous rage that lay beneath his quiet exterior. She could not help it. She could not silence Clive. She could only long for Roland to go.

"We all try to do what seems best at the time," she heard his quiet voice saying, "but we never know how it will turn out. You are fortunate to have got well so soon. But I think you ought to be careful and keep very quiet. Any excitement might bring your trouble back."

Clive rose also, and the two men stood together on the hearth.

"No, I don't think it would. The doctor used to say that mine was not like other forms of insanity; that if I ever recovered it would never come back. I am so thankful it is so, for Hilda's sake. I want to make amends to her now. I think I should blow my brains out if I felt I were going to cloud her life again. But I'm convinced it's all right. I feel as sane as a man could, and in jolly fit condition every way. Are you going?" he added, as Roland took up his gloves from the table. "It's not late."



"No, but I want to get to bed early," Roland answered. "Look here, will you both dine with me to-morrow night at the Ritz, quite informally? You can run up in your car. Harrington is coming. Wouldn't you like to see him, Talbot, and tell him that you are cured?"

"Yes, we might do that. What do you say, Hilda?"

Hilda's face clouded. It was all pure misery for them to be together. Nothing, nothing could be done now. It was all too late. Why would not Roland see that? Still, it was true she could not avoid meeting him and talking with him. The Past will not be dismissed like a flunkey from behind one's chair. There were things to arrange. They were in his house. They must leave; they could not go on as his guests. Harrington, too, could not be ignored. He was the trustee of Clive's property. His sanity, his coming into his estate, all this would necessitate fresh financial arrangements, and certainly meetings of the three.

"Just as you like, Clive," she said, after that pause of darting reflection.

"Very well," returned Roland; "I shall expect you both at eight. Good night, Talbot. Good night, Hilda; even if you are married now I can't begin calling you by any other than your Christian name."

"I'll see you out, Colonel," Clive said, and the two men went out together.

Hilda, left alone, sat motionless, staring down at the floor; a sense of the strangeness of life and human emotions swept round her like a flood.

Varying as the winds or the waves of the sea, the passions of men rise and fall and storm and rage and grow calm as the hand of Time sweeps over all. What she had once so longed and wished for, and thought of in sleepless hours, her eyes drenched in useless tears, had happened to-night. Roland had returned and was full of love for her, wanting and desiring her with the old intensity. And now she did not care for it; it had not brought her joy, only cold anxiety and fear. The sight, sound and touch of him had not moved her except with a sort of dull pain. He appeared, not as the embodiment of her past happiness, but a menace to her future.

And why to-night? Why after weeks and months of empty waiting, why should he come to-night and destroy all her happiness with Clive? A glow of resentment burnt all through her. He had extracted a promise from her, which having given she must keep. Why had she promised? she asked herself angrily. He had no right to ask her, to interfere suddenly in her life and dictate her action, after leaving her to support her existence alone in any way she could for all this time.

But recalling Roland's face she knew she had done wisely in calming him with that promise. At this moment his jealousy was burning with a flame ready to consume everything. A week or two hence, perhaps, when he had recovered from the surprise and shock of Clive's sanity, in other circumstances, in other moods, that flame would have died down, leaving only a few cold ashes such as her passion for him had left to her. No, she could not have done otherwise, she thought; but her anger burnt hotly against him. She wanted Clive, she longed to feel his arms round her and to be gathered up to his breast and forget everything but the joy of his love. And now that he was sane and could understand things, she felt she would like to tell him the whole and gain his forgiveness, so that they could love without a shadow between them. He would forgive her if she voluntarily went to him with her confession. She hated so the lies and the veil of deceit that hung between them, but again for Roland's sake she felt she must keep silence. Unless she first had his consent it did not seem that she was justified in disclosing what was his secret as well as hers.

She was just in the same attitude of stony thought when Clive came back.

"I have seen him off," he said. "What a good-looking man he is! Did you know him long before we were married?"

"Oh, yes, long before."

"Well, he's a good friend to have. I remember Harrington used to think no end of him."

"Yes, he is very good. Here is your coffee, but I'm afraid it is cold."

"It doesn't matter. I don't like it too hot," returned Clive, lightly taking a chair close by hers. Then after a minute he said in a serious tone:

"Hilda, you know I am very much distressed because, although my head is quite clear now, I don't seem to have got my memory back of things. That shows something is still very wrong. I want you to help me. For instance, about the child. I seem to remember perfectly all about our marriage. I have gone over every day as carefully as I can, but I can remember nothing about our love in it; all that is under a terrible blank. I don't understand why, if I can remember everything else, I can't recall that in the least."

Hilda's face was scarlet; the waves of blood poured over it, scorching, till it seemed to her they must drive their way through the skin. Yet she forced herself to look up at him and answer calmly:

"Dearest, do not worry yourself too much over all these things just now. It is quite likely the brain does not work evenly. You will remember everything in time. It will all come back to you. Do not let us worry about anything to-night. We have so much to be thankful for that you have recovered as you have. Kiss me again!"

She stretched out her arms to him, and Clive, intoxicated with love and joy, felt indeed that nothing mattered and he need not press for explanations that night. Her distressed expression, her scarlet blush, seemed a reproach to him. What did some recollections of the past, even if he had lost hold on them, matter, since she was his now, in the present and the future? He drew her close to him and kissed her and then gazed down upon her in a sort of rapture.

"Hilda," he said, very softly, "is it not strange to think that all these other evenings we have crept off to our separate quarters, so dull, so lonely, but to-night all will be changed, won't it? We shall go together to your room, shan't we, dearest?"

He pressed his lips down on hers as he ended, so that she had no opportunity for replying, and she gave herself up to those few moments of delight and clung to them, knowing the struggle and storm to come.

"Clive," she whispered at last. "You must not ask me to-night. I am so very tired, and the boy sleeps there; we must not wake him. Another time, dearest, you shall come."

She felt his arms tighten their clasp round her.

"My darling, I don't mean to be unkind; I don't want to be," and she heard the new tone of resolution in his voice, "but you must understand that the time for telling me how I shall act and what I shall do is

gone. I am not your younger brother any longer. I am your husband."

Hilda struggled vainly to free herself. Her lethargy was gone. She felt instinctively a warning of danger that overpowered even the delight of the senses.

"I do understand that," she said passionately, as he would not unlock his arms round her. "I don't wish to direct your actions, but you must allow me to decide my own, or you will make me hate you."

Clive dropped his arms instantly and drew back dismayed.

"My dearest, what have I said to offend you? I love you so dearly. You are everything to me. You know your wishes are law to me, but cannot you find it in your heart to be kind to me, just a little kind this one night that is such a glorious one for me?"

"No, not to-night. You must be patient. I feel ill . . . tired. I want rest. Let me go, dearest."

She moved away from him to the door. Clive stood for a moment where he was: all the instincts within him forbade him to force his love on a woman who appealed to him to desist, who was unwilling; but here the idea came to him that Hilda was not really unwilling. How she had yielded to his kiss, asked for it only just now! Perhaps she was only acting, so as to test him to see if really he had the will and feelings of a man, or if he were still the boy who would accept her dictates. It was this that

prompted him to cross the room as she neared the door, and before she could open it he had overtaken her and seized both her hands.

"Patient?" he repeated hotly. "No, you shan't shut me out of your love and your life any longer."

Hilda looked into his face, passionate, excited, beautiful as she had never seen it, and a fury swept over her to think she had to resist him. She stood still for a moment, which disarmed Clive and made him involuntarily release his grip. Then with a sudden wrench she twisted her hands free and ran like a flash to a little writing-table by the window. In its drawer she knew there was a small pistol belonging to Roland. She drew it out and turned to face Clive with its muzzle pressed against her breast.

"If you follow me you will get my dead body, nothing more," she said.

Clive stood still. He had seen the revolver lying in the drawer, but it had never occurred to him to examine it or see if it were loaded. He did not know now if it were or not, but the risk of its being so, and her injuring herself by carelessly handling it, appalled him.

They looked at each other in silence for a few seconds, and the picture of her in her white lace dress with some blush roses in its bodice, and the cold steel of the revolver pressed hard into the white panting bosom, her pale face above, with its incomprehensible look of love and desire on it, stamped it-

self indelibly into Clive's brain. An immense longing for her filled him, but fear for her held it in abeyance.

"Lay down that thing," he said.

"If you promise to let me go in peace and not to follow me."

"Certainly. My wife has no need of a pistol to defend herself."

Hilda laid down the revolver on the table. Clive, who had been opposite to her, stood on one side and she passed him in silence to the door and went out. She did not dare to look at him, lest she might yield to the temptation to throw herself into his arms. Her heart beat hard, as waves of anger against Roland and passion for Clive beat through it. How many nights she had longed for his love, thought of it, pictured it, hoped for it, and now that it was here, offered to her, she had to refuse it; to act, to pretend. How she hated it all.

When would she be able to lead the open, simple, natural life she wanted? She went up to her room in a state of vehement resentment which only calmed itself a little when she thought of the joy of Clive's recovery. She was fully rewarded now for those sleepless nights of patient self-control, for her steady adherence to the system she had planned out for him. He had recovered, just as she hoped, perfectly. The just, delicate, even balance of that complicated machine, the human brain, had been given back to it.



And now how happy they could be! They must move from Roland's house. Clive must settle his financial affairs, and then they would go out together somewhere in the world and find that bright spot of blue skies, and forests, and sparkling rills, and open simple life she had once dreamed of with Roland, and which he had derided and rejected. Clive would love it, she knew, as she did. She opened the door of her room very gently for fear of waking the sleeping child, but she knew sleep was impossible to herself. All her veins were glowing, and she began to pace restlessly up and down the room with swift silent feet, as on her wedding night.

## CHAPTER XV

ROLAND, after Clive had parted with him, walked on mechanically through the park towards the station, where there would be plenty of night trains to take him back to London. He could hardly realise yet the whole force and meaning of what had taken place in the interview that he had anticipated would be so utterly different. He had expected to find them as he had left them; Clive friendly, boyish, unsuspecting, uncomprehending; Hilda passionate, ardent, longing for him, obedient to his lightest word or suggestion. He had thought they would welcome him, press him to stay; they might well do so, since it was his house they were in. He had pictured Hilda's delight as she had superintended the making ready of his room, the kisses and the whispered confidences when the boy was absent, and then . . . the night.

How utterly the reality had disappointed him, and now as a stranger he was walking through the darkness, away from her house alone. How was it all? he asked himself, and his thoughts, bitter, savage, resentful, went back through the whole evening again, from his first sight of them through the window, till now.

Clive had recovered. That, of course, stood out distinctly; that, he told himself, had made all the difference; but another furious voice in him told him there was another fact more fatal still. Hilda had changed, and this gave him the real deep agony he was suffering. She had changed, she had changed; could he ever regain her? Why had he left her so long? Why had he not come sooner? It was only this very evening, it seemed, that Clive's madness had given way, leaving him as a powerful rival to himself. If he had come before that happened, what then? he asked himself. When had Hilda changed towards himself, he wondered, and how deep, how lasting was that change? If he had the opportunity, could he not win her back?

"I would rather you left me to Clive now." Her words rang in his ears distinctly, but perhaps that was only because she foresaw difficulties, complications, in any other course, now that Clive was sane. She had always told him she would hate the life of lies and deception her marriage would mean if they were to continue their relations after it, and how much more difficult, how much more complicated would that deception of the husband be, than of the ignorant boy! Perhaps, as she said, it would be impossible. Then if that were so, she should come to him openly, he would have her abandon everything rather than give herself to Clive. He cursed him over and over again in his thoughts, and

his jealous rage in its consuming fury had brought him to a point where his love for Hilda had never led him.

To wrest her from his rival, to take her away from the other man, on whom he had forced her, and who now had every claim and right to her, he would throw over all he had so far valued and respected, all to which he had so mercilessly sacrificed Hilda and himself. The world, his position, his regiment, her good name, all might go, provided only he kept her for himself and Clive was defeated.

Clive! Clive! how maddeningly he came before him! His happy assurance, his confidence, his triumph, his arrogant health and youth and beauty. No, he should never have her, never while Roland lived and could defend his own property. How sweet she had looked to-night! Though some change, he could not tell how deep, had come over her mind, there was none to shadow her face. The golden strands of hair were there, smooth and shining in the lamplight, the intense blue of the eyes, the yielding slope of shoulder and breast, the exquisite softness of the skin. All these had called to him, as in the past, though her voice and words were cold.

He walked at a furious pace, for the thoughts boiling within him seemed to force him along, and he reached Whitfield station some time before the next train was due. He continued his walk up and

down the platform, which was entirely deserted and asleep, and then it suddenly occurred to him why should he leave her to-night? Who knew what effect this night might have upon her future? She had said she would spend it alone, but she might find herself unable to keep her word. After all, why not throw everything over? Let the worst come? Take Hilda away with him and let Clive get a divorce. Clive would certainly do that if Hilda asked him to set her free. He would have preferred to enjoy his love in secret if it had been possible, but now that Clive had recovered it did not seem as if it would be possible. Hilda was not naturally gifted for deceit and intrigue; those who hate it as much as she did never were, and did not usually succeed in it. There seemed only open action, open defiance of the conventions which he had shrunk from so long, that could give her to him now. After all, what was a wife leaving her husband for another man and some divorce proceedings? People did not think much of that now. Society was full of divorced couples and runaway wives. It would make much less of a scandal than any of Hilda's plans for remaining with him, which he had rejected before her marriage. Our civilisation is so twisted and crooked that the natural error of an unthinking girl in giving herself to a man she loves is looked upon with horror, whereas the treachery and cruelty of the lying, deceitful and faithless wife is accepted with gay equanimity!

Roland reflected on this, and it seemed to him easier to face scandal and social inconvenience than parting with her to Clive. To leave her to weep for him alone while he was in Egypt, to know her waiting and longing for him, was one thing. It was another, and far harder, to think of her as a contented, happy bride of his rival.

At the fiftieth round on that short, dark platform Roland turned out of the little station and struck up again through the park towards Whitfield. Some voice within seemed to call to him it was folly, to say warningly, "Better leave her, better let the past go. It is not generous, nor wise, nor fair to disturb her now when you see she is likely to find happiness in the path you yourself marked out for her." But this voice was far weaker than the raucous shriek of his jealousy and the cries of the senses, and he went on steadily through the soft dark night to his house.

When he reached the lawn he saw that only two windows still remained lighted, that of the drawing-room in the middle of the house, and another under one of the gables at the end. He conjectured from this that possibly Clive had been left and was still sitting up in the drawing-room, and Hilda had gone alone to her own room, which was one of the large guest chambers under the gable. He had to cross before the drawing-room window to reach the gable end of the house, and as he did so he glanced in. As he thought, Clive was there alone, sitting where

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they had lately been sitting together, his head in his hands, apparently lost in reflection. Then he passed on silently to the other window, the blinds of which were not drawn.

White lace curtains hung over it, and through these Roland, standing back a little on the lawn, could see easily the whole of the room. In one corner stood a large double bed, and beside it a little bassinette covered over with bows of light blue ribbon. He did not pause to notice anything further, for Hilda's figure, seated in the centre in one of the arm-chairs, drew all his attention. She had taken off her dress, and was now in the lightest muslin dressing-gown, and had loosened all her hair, so that it fell in its long ripples over her shoulders, exactly as it had, he remembered with beating heart, on the first night he saw her when she was drying it at the fire. Her head lay back on the top curve of the chair, her arms along its arms, her eyes were closed. The whole listless attitude gave the impression of intense fatigue.

Roland smiled to himself as he saw her. She had kept her word, then. She was alone; and so long a time had elapsed since he had left them that it did not seem as if she were waiting for Clive. Had he been coming to her, he would certainly have come before. Roland approached the open window noiselessly, laid his hand on the low sill and then vaulted over it into the room.

Hilda turned instantly, her hands on the chair arms, then she sprang to her feet with an expression of terror.

"I begged you not to come, and you promised," she said in a tone of reproach.

"There is no reason why I should not come to my own," he answered, and his voice and eyes were very tender. The memory of Como and its sad pealing bells, and all the joy she had given him there, was upon him.

"I was your own once, but you gave me over to another," she answered sadly. Then she added in a quick tone of sudden fear, "Roland, it may be death to you to be found here. I do beg you to go."

Roland laughed. "Death could not frighten me away from you, my sweet."

He approached her, and Hilda, pale and cold with fear for him, retreated to the cradle, laying her hand on its head.

"For my sake, for the sake of our child, I do beg you to go."

"Is this our boy?" asked Roland. "Let me see him."

Hilda stooped, and with a gentle hand lifted a filmy veil from the cradle and showed the child sleeping there, its small, round, golden head resting amongst the lace.

"Is he not a darling?" she whispered. "In all



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the terrible times without you he was such a comfort to me."

"If it has been terrible for you, what do you suppose this year has been for me? and now when I come back I find someone else trying to take my place!"

"The husband you forced upon me! As to the year, you chose it for yourself. Oh, how I wanted to come with you!"

"Come with me now! I find I can't live without you! We'll face it all, whatever there is to face!"

"But it's different now. It's so much more difficult."

"Why?"

"Because there are others to consider. Clive wants me now."

"Well, he shall never have you while I am alive."

"I can't be unkind to him. I do care for him, and he has been so good to me! If you only knew how good and kind he has been to me."

"I don't want to know, and I don't care. Clive has no rights, and if he had I shouldn't care! Hilda, come with me now! I want you, need you, and I have to protect you from him. If I leave you here I see very well what will happen."

"Nothing will happen to-night. I told him if he followed me he would not find me alive."

"Then what is the use of staying? Come with me!"

"Think if he found me gone . . . with you . . . how he would suffer."

"You have not to think about him," returned Roland impatiently. "Neither have I. Clive must take care of himself. Each man has to fight for his own, both to get it and keep it."

"*He* has done all he could, and *you* left me," she answered in a low tone.

She did not wish to insist upon her own awakened love and passion for Clive. She divined that in Roland's present state, if she did, she would rouse that frightful jealousy in him that she so much wished to assuage. She felt that Roland would yield possibly to her remaining bound by duty to Clive, that would hurt him far less than if the ties of love were holding her.

"Well, now I want to undo that mistake," he answered.

"I don't think you can, any more than we can ever undo our mistakes."

Roland came very near her and tried to draw her into his arms, but she would not let him do so, and retreated till the child's cradle was between them.

"Come," he said merely, in answer to her last words. "In half an hour we can be at the station. Twist up your hair and slip on a cloak."

"And leave the boy? leave Clive? secretly? No; when you made me marry him I accepted responsibilities towards him."

"Responsibilities to an idiot who did not even know what the ceremony meant!"

"I don't think that would lessen my responsibilities, but in any case he knows what it means now."

"Yes, and that's why I won't leave you here. I never meant to marry you to a man who would try and rob me of you. You wanted to come to me before; now I ask you, and you won't. How you have changed!"

"Everything has changed. Before, my coming to you would only have been unconventional; now it would be cruel. Before, it would have been breaking the laws of society; now, it would be breaking the laws of one's own conscience. They are two very different things."

"There were times when you put me before your conscience! Here is your cloak, put it on, or your dress, and come."

Hilda looked back at him, recognising the old way of tone and manner. He had not altered in the least. Tall, fine, kingly in appearance as ever; commanding, impetuous, selfish, domineering as ever. And it had all once so pleased her; now it did not please her at all.

"No," she said steadily.

Roland threw the cloak down on a chair with a gesture of exasperation. In that moment they neither of them heard the door open gently behind

them. Clive entered the room, and catching sight of the two figures standing there, paused, absolutely petrified for the moment, a few feet from the door.

Then with a sudden quick step he advanced to the centre of the room.

"Hilda!"

They both turned instantly to face him; then Hilda went forward to meet him, her face alight with anger.

"Clive! This is how you keep your promise then!"

A look of indignation and scorn came over his face. For the first time she saw it was severe and stern towards her.

"I did not come to seek you. I passed in here for a moment to look at the boy. I thought you were long since asleep. I see now how it was you were so anxious for me not to come!"

He was very pale. His hands clenched themselves involuntarily at his sides as he looked across her at Roland.

"I tell you it is not so," Hilda exclaimed passionately. "I came here to be alone."

"Then why is that man here?" returned Clive furiously.

He pushed Hilda aside and turned to Roland.

"What are you doing here in my house at this time? Go out of it, and never come into it again. What right have you to be here?"

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Roland came forward and stood straight in front of Clive.

"*You* order me out of *your* house," he said calmly, but in a tone that seemed to cut like steel. "You ask what right *I* have here? I might better ask, what right *you* have here! What are you? You were a poor mad fool, brought from an asylum, a dupe, made to lend your name to screen a woman *I* loved. You own nothing, you have no rights, you are a beggar whom *I* am supporting, sheltering. I am master here. This house is mine, the child is mine, the woman is mine. Everything is mine."

Clive listened to this speech standing like a statue. All colour left his face till it looked cut out of white stone. A paralysing agony seemed gripping him. He could not believe, could not accept what he heard. The insults to himself were nothing, they passed over him without hurting; but Hilda, his golden cloud, the absolutely perfect thing he had so adored! Could it be true of her? Could this man really have the right to say these things?

"Hilda *yours*?" he said mechanically, aloud.

"Ask her."

Clive turned to where she stood. She also was pale as death, but her head was held up and her eyes looked blue no longer. They were black with anger. By that last speech Roland had cut the last thread that bound her to him. It seemed to her so unutterably brutal. She allowed for his passion,

his jealousy, everything. She understood that he hoped by ruining her in Clive's eyes to more surely gain her for himself; but it was unforgivable. Not to save her life would she have so disgraced and defamed him, or given up that secret which belonged equally to them both.

She met Clive's gaze full as he turned it towards her.

"Hilda, is this true?"

She went forward to him. "He has put it all so cruelly, but that is true. I have been his."

"Whose child is it?"

"His."

"Now are you satisfied?" asked Roland mockingly. "Go out of this room, you have no place here."

Clive's face set into more rigid lines.

"I have my legal rights at least left me," he answered coldly. "Legally my wife is mine, and the child too. As to the house, that may be yours; if so, to-morrow I shall certainly go out of it, but I shall take my wife and child with me."

"Legal rights! where a woman is concerned," repeated Roland contemptuously. "Go out of the room or I shall throw you out."

He advanced furiously towards Clive, who stood unmoved, but before he could reach him Hilda had thrown herself between the two men, facing Roland with both arms outstretched so as to protect Clive.

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"I will not have you touch him," she said. "How can you act like this? My room should be sacred to you. I begged you not to come. I ask you to go now. You shall not fight together here."

"When I go I take you with me," returned Roland.

Clive put his hand on Hilda's shoulder. "Hilda," he said, speaking with white lips and only with a great effort, for he thought by his next words he was losing her for ever. "It is for you to decide. It is true I have legal rights, but I shall never use them against you. If you wish to go now to this man, you are free to do so. I will obtain a divorce as soon as possible so that he can marry you if he will. I shall not dispute the possession of your child; that you can have also. Ever since I first saw you I have had but this one idea, your happiness; you seemed so perfect to me, my dear bright golden cloud, I could not bear to keep you against your will, to imprison you. You are only fit to float in the sunlight. Whatever I suffer about you does not matter at all, as long as you are happy."

A great rush of tears came into her eyes as she heard him and looked at him. She fell on her knees before him and seized both his hands in hers.

"Clive," she said passionately, "I have decided. I want to stay if you can forgive me everything, now you know it all. I did love Roland, I admit. I did not want to marry you. I wanted to go to him in

Egypt, but it is all past now. *Troja fuit.* Now I love you and I want to stay with you."

'An immense sense of happiness poured over Clive, like balm streaming over gaping wounds. He was not going to lose her. Hilda was his; she loved him; how passionately her burning hands clung to his; the cold sword of separation was not going to fall between them. She was there with him, loving him, at his feet. He bent over her and raised her up to him.

"My own! my dearest, don't kneel to me. I have nothing in the world to forgive. Before you met me your life was your own. Sweetest, if you stay with me, you give me more happiness than any man deserves."

Hilda clung to him and pressed her face with closed eyes against his breast. Since Roland's cruel speech she felt she did not wish to even look at him. The mere sight of him seemed to hurt. Over her head, bent on his shoulder, Clive looked across to Roland, who stood motionless, watching all this with ironic eyes.

A horrible agony was upon him, a sense of irremediable loss; the picture came to his memory of Hilda as she had knelt to *him* before he left for Egypt, asking him to take her. He had thought then she demanded too much of him; that the sacrifices he would have to make would be too great. Now there was nothing he would not give, no price



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he would not pay for her, but it was too late. Never again would that wild, wayward, devoted passion be his. Instead, he could have the world and its gifts to which he had formerly sacrificed it, but just then they seemed nothing to him.

So all his plans had turned out like this, had been utterly transformed by the inexorably revolving wheel of Time. The man he had hoped to take advantage of and make use of had grown into an invincible rival; the passion he had hoped to tame and repress had died under his treatment; the woman whom he had stored in his house, as he stored his furniture, against his return, had escaped to the arms of another.

As a clever cunning basket-maker bends osier twigs, he had bent seemingly very pliable materials to his wishes, but suddenly he found the slender pliant things had all sprung back and flown out at different angles, and never again could he shape them, or they be obedient to his touch.

An immense regret enfolded him, a penetrating realisation of his error and his loss.

"Will you go now?" Clive said quietly. "You have heard her decision."

Roland looked at her figure clinging closely to Clive, and recognised indeed that against the force of these circumstances he had himself built up he was powerless. He was vanquished, and, most bitter fact of all, by something of his own creation. In

that moment within him seethed such a fury of rage that he could have sprung upon Clive and strangled him with his hands, but the primitive instinct of the male was held down beneath an iron control, a calmness and composure of exterior that remained unbroken.

Clive said nothing beyond that one sentence. Roland had insulted him, but he was of too generous and noble a nature to repay him now by adding one word that could wound a man suffering so frightfully as he knew Roland must be in those seconds of loss, of failure, of defeat.

"Yes, I have heard her latest decision," Roland answered sardonically, "and I imagine a lady who changes so lightly and easily will soon change again."

Then he turned to the window by which he had entered, vaulted over the ledge, and they were alone.

Clive felt Hilda quiver in his arms as those last words fell upon her, and he tightened his protective clasp round her.

"Darling, darling, my golden one," he murmured in her ear; "look up, kiss me. We are alone together."

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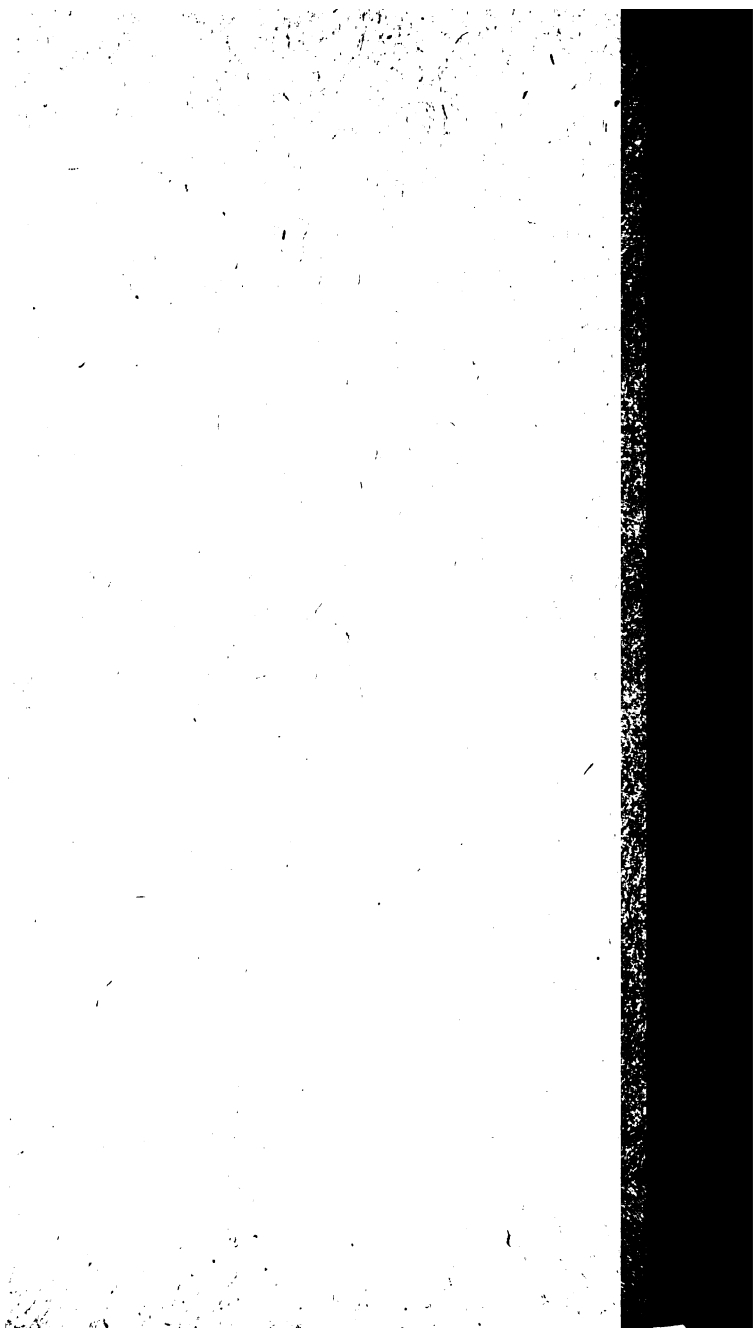
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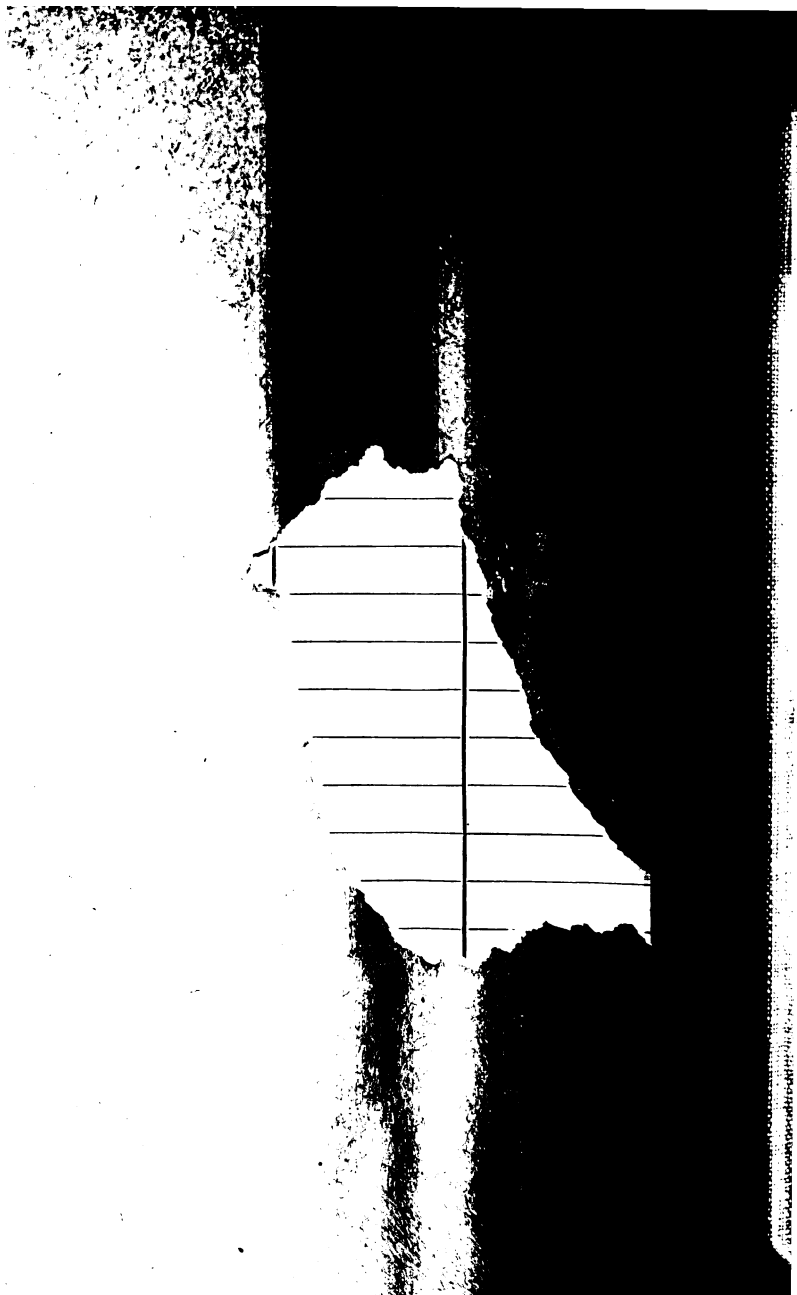












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